VISIT…

EXISTENTIALIST CINEMA

William C. Pamerleau

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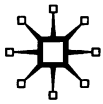

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For my parents Bill and Rene
And for my sister Cheri, in memoriam

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Introduction

It is difficult to underestimate the importance of film in contemporary society. Almost everybody likes to watch and discuss movies, and many people invest a good deal of time reading about them and following the careers of various film industry personalities. Of course, there is no one reason *why* people are drawn to cinema. There are as many motivations as there are types of films, but the fact that they serve as a form of entertainment is probably the most common. For a couple of hours, a movie transports us someplace else; we are completely caught up in the people and events depicted on the screen. Movies can take us on a thrill ride or involve us emotionally with the characters, and in these cases they serve as spectacle and amusement. Cinema can affect us for quite different reasons than these, however. Some films can make us think critically or appreciatively about our life or the world we live in. They can reach us at a deep level, perhaps even changing us in some small but fundamental way, because they show us something true and important about life. They might empower us, encouraging us to be the kind of person we have always wanted to be. Maybe a movie depicts a character that we recognize as our selves, in part, but living the life that we would have had we had more affirmation of our ambitions. Or it might show us the tragic limitations of human nature, as when a film depicts the failure of a character to overcome a spiritual crisis, and it then serves as a warning of a fate that might well be ours unless we make some changes. Whatever the particular manner or effect, movies like this are important not only because they entertain us, but because they cause us to reflect on issues that bear on the meaning of life. This book is about these sorts of films.

This book is also about existentialism, the philosophical movement which describes the human condition as it is experienced by the

individual. The sort of existentialist themes I will focus on throughout the book are the ones that attempt to make clear the very issues that the movies discussed above are concerned with. Meaningful movies and existentialism share the same goal – to say something important about the human condition – but do so through two very different methods. The philosophers articulate theories that spell out what life is like and how we might confront it. The films discussed in this book, on the other hand, *show* us, through a depiction of characters and events, how people live. They give us concrete portrayals of specific circumstances, and though a film might offer insights similar to those of a philosophical essay, there is something about that concrete depiction of the film that cannot be easily reproduced in the abstraction of an essay. As a result, films can be used to assess the accuracy of philosophical descriptions.

More specifically, the films in this book will be used to investigate issues addressed by such existentialist philosophers as Sartre, Heidegger, Beauvoir, Tillich, and Nietzsche. Scholarly works on film and philosophy have blossomed in quantity and quality over the past few years. Much of the work focuses on popular films, however, and there are good reasons for doing that. Popular films such as *The Matrix* or *Memento*, which deservedly get a lot of attention, do indeed have philosophically relevant content. They are also very accessible, encouraging philosophical thinking from those that might not otherwise have made the effort. But I think that the insights of the existentialist philosophers are better served through an investigation of a different sort of cinema: films that realistically portray the human condition. Because these films convey something true about how we live and the concrete experiences of contemporary persons, they serve not only as illustrative examples but as critical tools. They can help us determine if the philosophical account of issues like freedom, meaning, and authenticity hold true when compared to the insights generated by films. There are many instances when they exemplify and corroborate the philosophical account. But movies sometimes show us that life is more complicated than we might think from reading a philosopher's description of it, or they might show us that the philosophical view begins to seem less plausible when connected to real situations and real people (or, at least, realistically *portrayed* situations and people). One major goal of this book is to make use of film as a tool for understanding existentialism from both of these general approaches. As illustrations of the various existentialist themes, films help us *appreciate* the important insights of the existentialists. But most of these films were probably never produced to serve as illustrations of philosophical ideas, so their portrayals of life include insights

that occasionally conflict with the conclusions or presuppositions of the philosophers. That can also be helpful, as a movie that seeks to capture something important about life on its own terms will be more honest than one that attempts to support or illustrate a philosopher's theory. As realistic examples of how people live, therefore, films also help us *critique* existentialist theories.

Some issues relating to the use of film as a tool for philosophy need to be resolved before beginning a discussion of specific films and existentialist themes. To that end, this book is divided into two parts. Part I explores theoretical issues relevant to this project, like articulating the position of various existentialists, investigating the relationship between philosophy and film, and addressing the potential criticism from film theorists that movies are not sufficiently realistic to inform philosophical descriptions of life. The overall intent of Part I, then, is to understand the implications of using film as a tool for the study of existentialism and to assuage any misgivings about that endeavor. Part II carries out the project that Part I seeks to legitimize. Each chapter is devoted to a specific existentialist theme and a discussion of films that in some way also address that theme. In keeping with the goal of appreciation and critique explained above, each chapter aims at realizing what is true and important about the existentialists' understanding while using the films' lessons to amend the philosophical view. Sometimes this amounts to a criticism of the philosophical position; sometimes the original position is expanded and strengthened. In any case, the goal of each chapter is to end up a little wiser than before regarding the issue under discussion.

A few introductory comments will help clarify the intent of the issues covered in Part I. Chapter 1 is a summary of the positions of the existentialists that turn up in Part II. This chapter is necessary for two reasons. First, I hope that this book might be accessible to persons who have an interest in film and/or philosophy but are not scholars. Existentialism and film both have wide audiences, after all, which extend well beyond academia. I have therefore endeavored to give clear, if relatively brief, explanations of the central concepts and the most important issues. Even for those readers very familiar with existentialism, however, Chapter 1 is important for another reason, which is perhaps the more important function of this chapter. Existentialists, while they agree on several points, vary widely in their individual philosophies, and every thinker discussed in this book has written about far more than the content that makes it into the discussions contained here. I am approaching existentialism thematically, and that means I will be selecting only

certain ideas from certain thinkers. I do not claim to be giving a complete account of the entire movement of existentialism or even cover all the essential themes from any particular philosopher. Rather, I am choosing a range of topics from select existentialists that will serve the purposes of this book. There is, however, a unifying theme to these topics: how we find meaning in our lives and how difficult that task can be. Chapter 1 therefore serves to articulate the range of themes that constitute existentialism in this context. The claims I make in the remainder of the book will, hopefully, be clearer and more compelling when it is understood what I have in mind when I refer to the movement.

Chapter 2 presents the argument for the use of film as a tool for philosophy, and particularly as a critical tool for philosophy. I argue that films are not themselves forms of philosophy. While some philosophers of film contend that there is a sense in which films actually philosophize, I think it is better to say that *we* philosophize about what we learn from the movies. More, the fact that movies are not constrained by a traditional philosophical approach and vocabulary means that they have the potential to add something to our understanding that might not have occurred to philosophers. Even when filmmakers do not intentionally present existentialist issues (and most discussed in this book do not), they often capture something important about human situations which clearly applies to the descriptions of the existentialists. In fact, I argue that existentialism is more qualified for this marriage with film than most other forms of philosophy, because existentialism is largely a description of the sorts of experiences we can find in film. Movies concretely portray events in a way that allows us to make comparisons with our own experiences, thereby permitting us to consider how an existentialist description would apply to this 'real world' application. The sorts of films necessary for this project are ones with a high degree of realism, then. This chapter therefore begins a discussion of the realism debate in film theory, settling on a view that views the real as a portrayal of experience. Of course, only certain movies, namely, those which honestly depict the human situation, will be of use, so some discussion of which sorts of movies will work for this project, and which will not, is in order.

Chapter 3 continues the discussion of realism, which by this point is central to the project. I argue that the use of the right kinds of film provides realistic portrayals of the human condition, despite the fact that they are typically fictional narratives. Much has been written attacking the notion of realism in cinema, and much of that criticism is well-founded. As one line of argument goes, film realism far greater reflects

our expectations and learned sense of plausibility than it does any account of what the world is really like. Filmic conventions help shape our perception of the world; and if that is true, then it would seem problematic indeed to rely on film as an honest report of the human condition. Chapter 3 investigates these challenges to film realism and responds with a theory of narrative identity. Following the views of Paul Ricoeur and David Carr, I argue that our life is best understood as the product of our own narration: we account for the meaning of our lives in terms of a story about what we have done and who we plan to be, selectively emphasizing and interpreting life's events into a unified whole, like the plot of a novel. If this view is correct, and I believe there is good reason to think it is, then the creation of a meaningful life and the imposition of meaning on the world around us is a creative process that is not dissimilar to the creation of a film. Films *are* realistic, I contend, not because they reflect the world the way it really is, but because they reflect the world the way we experience it – as a process of choosing among narratives we inherit from our cultural traditions and finding, or creating, our own reading of events. In short, films are realistic portrayals of how we encounter life in the one aspect that is crucial for this book: the way in which we establish meaning. Furthermore, I do not think that an affirmation of a narrative identity poses any deep risk to an existentialist position. I argue that all the crucial themes I employ from the existentialist perspectives can be rethought in terms of narrative identity. Far from undermining the descriptive power of existentialism to say something true about the human condition, a narrative existentialism retains all the elements of the choosing subject (now described in terms of a narrator) while acknowledging the social component of our identities, and it is precisely that social component that the study of film in Part II repeatedly reveals.

With these theoretical considerations addressed, it is time to begin the analysis described and justified in Part I. Each chapter in Part II loosely consists of two components: an account of a specific theme in existentialism, as it is developed by a particular philosophy, and a selection of films (usually two) that can be read as a statement on the same issue. The themes were chosen partly because they represented the central topics of existentialism and partly because the movies themselves suggested the topics. Films like *La dolce vita*, *Winter Light*, and *Harold and Maude* made an impact on me far before I thought of writing this book. The movies that seemed to have the most to say about an existentialist issue were chosen for that reason, so the selection of themes is based largely on what I found in the films. That, however, is the entire point

of the book: to show that films can make their own, unique contribution to these issues and serve as more than illustrations of the philosophers' views.

Chapter 4 kicks off Part II by discussing the nature of meaning directly. It relies on Sartre's description of meaning generated by the choice of a project which, in turn, relies on Sartre's radical freedom. A study of Antonioni's films accomplishes two things. First, it shows that the ability to choose is very largely affected by social circumstances in a way that makes it necessary to speak of the *degrees* of freedom. This insight shows why a conception of freedom that admits of limitations, like Beauvoir's, may be superior to the view of the early Sartre. Second, the visual style of Antonioni's films, particularly those from the early sixties, shows us the unique way in which movies can convey insights and reach us in ways that essays cannot.

Chapter 5 continues to explore the challenge that the modern world poses for finding meaning, now in the area of religion. It does so through Paul Tillich's views on religiosity and the films of Ingmar Bergman. Tillich sees religiosity as an attitude toward the meaning of life, which makes for a much wider concept of religion than one usually finds in conventional dogma. Bergman's characters deal with their attempt to find religion, and their disenchantment with it, in a way that captures and illustrates this attitude perfectly. Again, the role of others in helping us find and maintain this religious 'dimension of depth' supplements Tillich's views, showing that even with something as personal as religiosity, individuals are vulnerable to the effects of others in their pursuit of meaning.

Chapter 6 uses the films of Woody Allen to explore the implications of existentialism (particularly the secular variety) on morality. This chapter does not focus on a particular philosopher, but uses insights from a variety of thinkers along with a discussion of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. It is that novel, rich in existentialist insights, that motivates Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors* and *Match Point*. While Allen retains Dostoevsky's challenge to conventional morality in the modern world, he shows how difficult it is to make sense of morality without objective foundations. Specifically, the fact that someone can commit a horrendous crime and get away with it, both in terms of social censure and internal sanctions, challenges the very essence of morality. Dostoevsky, along with most philosophers, tends to assume that we'll pay for bad deeds with a guilty conscience if not a guilty verdict, and Allen's films explore the impact of finding this assumption false. Allen may not offer any solutions, but the films pose the problem

of the human condition in stark and honest terms, which is by itself a worthwhile advance in our understanding of issues so given to distortion and wishful thinking.

In Chapter 7, we begin to discuss ways to address these problems with an investigation into the concept of authenticity. Using Heidegger and Sartre, authenticity is explained as a combination of honesty (i.e., avoiding bad faith) and action (i.e., actualizing your values through your accomplishments). Fellini's *La dolce vita* and *8½* show that here Sartre seems to have gotten it right: while honest acknowledgement of your freedom and responsibility is essential to leading an authentic life, *realizing* the kind of life you purport to find meaningful is also necessary. The films also show us that maintaining the right attitude and commitment is more important than actually achieving goals. It's not happy endings that provide meaning so much as the perseverance of authentic and committed persons. The films again point out the role of others in supporting our efforts to realize a meaningful life.

Chapter 8 concludes the film analyses with an exploration of Nietzsche's concept of the free spirit, which complements the concept of authenticity from the previous chapter and provides further solutions to problems of meaninglessness. A Nietzschean freedom requires the development of our inner resources and the ability to creatively affirm one's own values while standing apart from the comfort of the status quo. The films *Dead Poets Society* and *Harold and Maude* provide edifying portrayals of personalities who exemplify that perspective on life. Both films also show the importance of spiritual guides or mentors in our search to achieve something like Nietzsche's freedom, so once again the role of others is manifested in the films in a way that is missing from the philosophy.

The themes, while varied, overlap one another, and all of them serve the general theme of the search for meaning in the modern world. They are arranged to provide a sense of development, both in terms of making the case for the cinematic contribution of film to existentialism and the progression of problem to solution in the search for meaning. Cinematically, early chapters emphasize the use of imagery in delivering insights, while the latter chapters tend to emphasize narrative (though both components always work together). In terms of the existentialist themes, the chapters of Part II are linked by a common theme: the creation and sustenance of meaning is, for most of us, a social – and therefore vulnerable – journey. The arrangement of the chapters seeks to make this theme visible and provide a sense of development: beginning with themes that admit the problematic nature of the social world

for finding meaning and ending with an account of the autonomous self, developed through its relations to others. So Antonioni's films, demonstrating the socio-economic limitations on freedom, constitute one book end, while *Harold and Maude*, portraying the victory of the free spirit, the other.

While an appreciation and critique of existentialism constitute the main goals of this book, I sincerely hope that readers will appreciate the films discussed as well. Whenever possible, I strongly recommend that readers view the films under discussion prior to reading the chapter, though their content is discussed in sufficient detail that even those who have never viewed the film will be able to appreciate the discussion. Still, reading descriptions cannot fully substitute for seeing the movie, particularly when the visual elements play a strong role in conveying the film's meanings. To that end, a list of the films discussed in Part II can be found below. All films, as of the writing of this book, are in print and should be available at rental stores with hearty classics and foreign sections. Films can also be purchased or rented through various internet sources. In fact, this project would have been far more difficult for me had I attempted this even a few years earlier than I did. The availability of mail order rentals make accessible the entire in-print collection of DVDs, and the quality of DVDs and high resolution home screens allows viewers the next best thing to a theater experience.

The films discussed here are rich in meanings and artistic accomplishment. Each scene can be appreciated for what it has to offer. Because this book focuses on the philosophical insights the films contain, viewing the films with the overview of existentialism from Chapter 1 in mind will be fruitful. In fact, anticipating philosophical themes provides a framework within which to interpret a movie, whether it be one of the art films or one of the more popular movies. The existentialist philosophies and the related films discussed in this book form a dynamic relationship; each is an opportunity to understand – and appreciate – the other.

Films and Directors Discussed in Part II (Recommended Rentals/ Purchases)

- Chapter 4 Antonioni: *L'avventura* and *L'eclisse*
- Chapter 5 Bergman: *Through a Glass Darkly* and *Winter Light*
- Chapter 6 Allen: *Crimes and Misdemeanors* and *Match Point*
- Chapter 7 Fellini: *La dolce vita* and *8½*
- Chapter 8 Weir: *Dead Poets Society*, and Ashby: *Harold and Maude*

Part I

Setting the Stage: Theoretical Issues

1
Existentialism: An Overview of Important Themes and Figures

'Existentialism' is a difficult term to define. Historically, it has been used in a wide variety of contexts and for diverse purposes. As far back as the ancient Greeks, one can find examples of texts that could today be described as existentialist, though it was not until the twentieth century that existentialism emerged as a conspicuous movement.[1] While today we would certainly classify eighteenth century figures like Dostoevsky and Nietzsche as existentialists, they did not use that term to describe themselves. By the time Sartre became famous for his works, shortly after World War II, the term was widely recognized as a description of a certain kind of literature, art, and philosophy, but by then it was also misunderstood by a large portion of society outside of academia. In his popular essay 'The Humanism of Existentialism', Sartre jokes that a woman who let loose a vulgarity exclaimed, 'I guess I'm becoming an existentialist', which for Sartre illustrates how vague and abused that term had become.[2] It doesn't help us understand the movement any better to know that its major figures, like Sartre, often denied being existentialists (though for reasons which make perfect sense, if you *are* an existentialist).

While even academics would have a difficult time agreeing on a specific definition of existentialism, there are some widely accepted characteristics that will serve as a starting point. First, most existentialists are reacting against a trend in philosophy prevalent at least since the Enlightenment (and really, since antiquity) which asserts that human beings are capable of understanding the truth about themselves and their world, if only they are willing to dedicate enough time and reason to the enterprise. According to this general view, we are capable of understanding something of the inherent nature of humanity, its essence, and of the moral and religious truths that can guide

our behavior.[3] The existentialists by and large have given up on this search. Some, like Kierkegaard, think it is epistemologically an impossible endeavor, because the human perspective is limited and always interpreted. We are thus not capable of attaining the perspective of the abstract and absolute, which these sorts of philosophers see as necessary for attaining Truth (with that capital 'T'). Others, like Nietzsche, believe that Truth of this sort is a culturally derived fiction; that is, there is no Truth, though there are contingent, historical truths (with a small 't'). Whatever the reason, the existentialists turn away from the task of doing a first philosophy, of finding general and universal Truth, and turn instead toward the lived experience of the individual.

This emphasis on the individual perspective constitutes the second general characteristic of existentialism. Beginning particularly with Kierkegaard, existentialists think that the most urgent concern of philosophical inquiry is a study of the concrete self. We will not discover what it means to live as a human being by making abstract descriptions of human traits, but by studying the way we actually experience the world. In fact, 'to live' is the key term here: we cannot reduce human beings to a mere collection of metaphysical, biological, or anthropological truths, as accurate as they may be. Those perspectives miss something essential about how persons encounter life, and the existentialist seeks to fill in that missing point of view by describing the inner experience of persons. This sometimes means describing consciousness itself, as phenomenologists like Heidegger and Sartre attempt to do.

That description yields a variety of observations on the human condition, but one of the most common and most fundamental to a general notion of existentialism is freedom, which is the third major characteristic of existentialism as I see it. All the major existentialist philosophers note the importance of freedom in some way. Even Nietzsche, who at one point in his writings admits to a complete determinism, at the same time celebrates the free spirit. His freedom consists largely of the individual's ability to rise above socially imposed limitations on one's identity; the free spirit is able to stand up against the pressures of conformity and consciously 'give shape to one's character', a task that requires significant and uncommon inner resources.[4] Sartre arguably celebrates freedom above all others, however, and the bedrock of his magnum opus *Being and Nothingness* is a dissection of consciousness that reveals how freedom is the one aspect of human nature that we cannot escape. Of course, to be free means that one is responsible for oneself, and that brings with it anxiety over the choices we make and possibly despair at having chosen somehow incorrectly. Similar

concepts regarding the uneasy relationship with freedom are found in many existentialist thinkers; and they are in large part responsible for the accusations that existentialism is dark or bleak. In fact, none of the major figures believes that human beings must spend their lives wallowing in despair; they simply wish to draw our attention to the cost of being free. On the contrary, this cost is well worth the goods we get in exchange: personal empowerment and meaning.

Meaning, in fact, is the culmination of these basic attributes of existentialism. Given the assumption that we will not find answers in an objective sense, either in some external and absolute Truth or in some essential human nature that determines who we must be, it is up to us to create meaning. Specifically, it is ultimately the responsibility of each individual to choose which values and goals will have significance. That does not mean that we are not affected by the social world, or that the values of others can hold no meaning for us. Rather, such values need not *determine* who we are; we are always free to choose otherwise. In the modern world, where an accessible media makes us aware of the differences that culture, place, and time can produce, we are also aware that it is only by chance that we have experienced the worldviews we were raised with. The realization, on the one hand, threatens all such worldviews with meaninglessness, because we know that each one is contingent. Without a foundation in Truth, what does it matter which values I choose? None seem inherently legitimate. On the other hand, the fact that our own way of looking at the world *is* contingent means that we have the power to choose, to interpret, and to create. This is why freedom simultaneously empowers us and makes us anxious: the meaning of our lives is ultimately up to us. We mold it through the lives we live and the attitudes we adopt. Some of us flee the realization of what those meanings are, however, as the task of striving for meaning and being honest with ourselves is not always easy. But the existentialist heroes persevere. They acknowledge life as authentic and meaningful with full realization of its contingency. I believe that it is this element of existentialism that makes the general view so appealing to persons today, not only for academics but for anyone who thinks about these things. Quite simply, the spirit of existentialism is all about the search for the meaning of life. Or better, it's the search for a perspective on life from which we can create meaning.

This is obviously a broad overview of existentialism, and it isn't accurate to say that each existentialist (or perhaps any) would endorse everything that I have written. However, I am convinced that all of them would agree with most of these points. The remainder of the chapter

is dedicated to an overview of the major figures in existentialism. This is by no means a complete list of the important existentialist philosophers, nor does it give a complete account of their views. Rather, my intention is to lay out those views that will apply to the ensuing examination of film and the various existentialist insights they contain.

Søren Kierkegaard

Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) is the first major figure in what we now identify as the existentialist movement. He was raised in a religious household but broke with Danish Lutheranism and generally opposed any form of organized religion that supported a complacent, conformist approach to religiosity. While an enthusiastic Christian, Kierkegaard believed that adherents should come to Christianity as individuals, with a personal, subjective relationship to God that cannot be achieved through mere adherence to dogma and ritual. Kierkegaard's entire life, in fact, was a rigorous dedication to individualism. The most dramatic example of this is his decision to break off his engagement to Regine Olsen; he felt his spiritual ambitions lead him away from the conventional life that marriage and career required.

Perhaps the best place to begin a discussion of Kierkegaard is with his rejection of the Hegelian philosophy that shaped philosophical discourse on the continent in the first half of the nineteenth century. Hegel viewed history as the systematic progression of thought toward ever more complex and accurate realizations of the nature of reality. Ultimately, human understanding will result in the overcoming of all past, partial understandings as it reaches its full development; at that point, mind – the universal nexus of mental activity – will consist of an unlimited, free, self-conscious state. Human history, therefore, is just the story of such attempts to realize that ultimate comprehension of reality, and each age supersedes and improves the previous one. Hegel's views are notoriously difficult to comprehend, but for the purposes of understanding Kierkegaard, it is enough to know that Hegel (as Kierkegaard reads him) was attempting to produce a philosophical system which could reveal the nature of humanity and the world, and which could resolve past difficulties in philosophy. While Hegel is specifically targeted, Kierkegaard rejects any such systematic attempt to find the truth by means of a complete, logical explanation.

From the work that most directly confronts systematic, abstract philosophy, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, we find that Kierkegaard's main difficulty with 'the system' is that human beings exist in the particular

and concrete now. As such, we are only capable of viewing the world from specific, limited vantage points, and such a perspective is not capable of producing some all-encompassing truth. 'Existence separates and holds the various moments of existence discretely apart; systematic thought consists of the finality which brings them together.'[5] As an example of what Kierkegaard means, consider your ability to think about the words on this page. As you read them, you only view at most a few words at a time. Even the most skilled speed readers are not able to perceive all the words on the page simultaneously, let alone comprehend at once what they all mean. Yet to grasp the page in its totality would require just that. Of course, we can read each word in succession and reach a sort of totality at the end of the page, and that may well be sufficient when it comes to comprehending a text. With something like the nature of the world or of ourselves, however, our limitations are far more serious. In fact, unlike a page of text, there may well be something about a complete system that is only graspable in its whole and can never be comprehended by combining all our discreet perceptions of the parts. To think that an individual could grasp truth at this level is to misunderstand the limits of humanity.

> 'Who is to write or complete such a system?'... Is he a human being, or is he speculative philosophy in the abstract? But if he is a human being, then he is also an existing individual. Two ways, in general, are open for an existing individual: *Either* he can do his utmost to forget that he is an existing individual, by which he becomes a comic figure, since existence has the remarkable trait of compelling an existing individual to exist whether he will it or not... *Or* he can concentrate his entire energy upon the fact that he is an existing individual.[6]

Of course, to concentrate on one's individuality is precisely to turn away from the goal of the abstract, speculative philosopher of the system. Kierkegaard is not just making a technical philosophical point about systematic philosophy, however. He *celebrates* the perspective of the concrete individual, urging us to put the subjective view of the individual ahead of the attempted objective view of abstract philosophy and science. From the individual's perspective, we are concerned with what our *experience* of things is and not what things are in themselves. Whereas the goal of objective thought is to get at the facts, subjective thought focuses on the effects that beliefs have for us as existing individuals. For example, you may learn that you have a serious medical

condition, and objectively, this knowledge amounts to a set of facts about biological effects, the course of the illness, the possibility of a cure, etc. These may indeed be the facts, but subjectively there is much more: fear, sorrow, worry, etc. will give this new information its place in our belief system. Our emotional reaction will make these facts stand out from all the other information that we believe to be true but which has little bearing on our lives. Many of us may know 'the facts', but their subjective impact will vary greatly depending on whether *you* have the illness or if you have simply read in the paper about someone else's illness. Kierkegaard refers to this as the distinction between the 'what' and the 'how'. From an objective perspective, *what* we believe is a matter of what facts you have learned, but objectively we are indifferent to the facts. Subjectively, the concern is with *how* the facts matter to us and how they affect the meaning of our lives.[7]

Most of our beliefs do not involve us very deeply. I believe that Juneau is the capital of Alaska, for example, but it would not much concern me if I were mistaken. I don't live in Alaska, and that is a bit of demographic data that has almost no impact on my life. Learning that I have a serious illness or that someone close to me has betrayed me, however, impacts me greatly. These sorts of things affect the very meaning of my life, as my future prospects, relationships, and goals will have to be rethought. That is why the subjective *how* of a belief is really the perspective that matters. The more a belief is central to the meaning of our lives, the more important the subjective component becomes.

For Kierkegaard, nothing is potentially more meaningful than the question of the existence of God. The objective search for this truth through philosophical arguments may or may not reveal the truth of God's existence, but the subjective effects of that belief are enormous. In fact, Kierkegaard recommends belief in God not because it is true in some objective sense (though Kierkegaard surely would agree that there is, in fact, a God), but because the *how* of this belief determines the entire meaning of our lives. The *how* of belief in God is the essence of faith; but in order to fully appreciate Kierkegaard's views on this topic, we first need to consider passion and inwardness, terms conceptually linked to faith.

As explained, certain beliefs impact the meaning of my life far more than others. When they contribute to a sense of meaning, Kierkegaard refers to their affect on us as 'inwardness'. To experience inwardness is to experience the emotionally rich state that emphasizes your sense of self together with a feeling of belonging or commitment to something beyond yourself. Only the subjective element of belief can produce

this emotional charge, this great passion, and it is the mark of what makes certain beliefs truly meaningful. Some beliefs are inherently valuable simply because they produce this inwardness. These are subjective truths, by which Kierkegaard means that they create the passion and inwardness that enhance our sense of meaning. Subjective truth is 'essential truth', or 'the truth which is essentially related to existence'.[8]

The inwardness created by subjective truths is enhanced by objective uncertainty. After all, if the basis for our belief is that something is factually true, we tend to treat the issue dispassionately, as a *mere* fact. Believing in something because it produces the passion of inwardness, despite our objective uncertainty about it, enhances inwardness. This sense of truth, or meaningfulness, is for Kierkegaard more important for human individuals than objective truth. 'Here is such a definition of [subjective] truth: *An objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation-process of the most passionate inwardness is the truth*, the highest truth attainable for an *existing individual*.'[9] So the beliefs that are most meaningful, that contain the most inwardness, are the ones we choose to believe precisely because they are meaningful, in spite of (and because of) how objectively unsure we are of them.

The range of beliefs that are legitimate candidates for subjective truths is unclear, but Kierkegaard focuses on the one belief that yields for him the greatest passion: the existence of God. Christianity, in particular, requires us to believe things that are not objectively provable or even comprehensible, specifically, the nature of God as existing simultaneously as a perfect, unlimited being and as an existing individual in the form of Jesus, together with such miraculous events as the resurrection. The inwardness that arises from a belief in God is so important that we simply lose too much if we wait until we can understand all these sorts of things objectively. More, we also lose sight of the real value of Christianity if we orient ourselves to it objectively rather than subjectively. The truth of Christianity lies in the *how* of the belief – its ability to affect us passionately – and not the objective *what*.

> If one who lives in the midst of Christianity goes up to the house of God, the house of the true God, with the true conception of God in his knowledge, and prays, but prays in a false spirit; and one who lives in an idolatrous community prays with the entire passion of the infinite, although his eyes rest upon the image of an idol: where is there most truth? The one prays in truth to God though he worships an idol; the other prays falsely to the true God, and hence worships in fact an idol.[10]

In another work, *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard illustrates this idea of faith through his interpretation of the Biblical story of Abraham. God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son as a testament of his faith. Uncomprehending, Abraham nevertheless trusts in the will of God and prepares the sacrifice. At the last minute, an angel intervenes and declares that Abraham has done enough to prove his faith; the actual sacrifice is not necessary. Kierkegaard is fascinated by this story. Exactly what is going on in Abraham's mind when he considers God's request? Ethically, there is no justification for this action. No greater good or overriding moral principle can make sense of the killing of his son. This is a trial, to be sure, but the senselessness of the request makes it different than most. Usually, temptation consists in putting our own selfish concerns over ethical requirements. Here 'the temptation is itself the ethical – which would keep him from doing God's will'.[11] Abraham will be unable to explain his action, because no rational explanation is possible. It is an act of faith, a *leap* of faith, a leap over such a rational, objectively satisfactory, account. As we have seen with his description of faith in the *Postscript*, however, there *is* a value in Abraham's leap: the inwardness that accompanies the choice to trust in God despite the absence of all rational explanation. Or, as I take Kierkegaard, Abraham chooses the religious movement because it is meaningful for him to do so, and the meaning is important enough to warrant one of the greatest possible sacrifices.

Kierkegaard establishes some fundamental features of existentialism that will be shared by the other philosophers discussed below, though his view leans heavily on Christian elements not-so-widely shared. The critique of systematic philosophy, the turn toward the concrete, existing individual, and the distinction between the *how* and *what* of belief will reappear, albeit in different terms, in the work of other existentialists. The role of faith in God as a source of inwardness will, of course, be of little interest to the atheistic existentialists, and other religious existentialists will have their own approach to God and religiosity.

Friedrich Nietzsche

The main works of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) were written roughly 40 years after Kierkegaard's, and while Kierkegaard does not seem to have had a direct impact on Nietzsche's writing, the two share substantially common views on truth, the role of the individual, and the importance of choice. Nietzsche, however, is as devoted to bringing about the end of Christianity as Kierkegaard is in promoting his revised

form of it. When it comes to concerns with the meaning of life, this difference is obviously significant. Nietzsche's attempt to move beyond Christianity has made his thought a controversial but enormously influential stage in the development of Western philosophy.

Nietzsche's writings are intentionally nonsystematic and constantly in flux. In fact, for the sake of comprehension, commentators usually impose more of a systematic connection between the important elements of his thought than Nietzsche does himself. Luckily, his writing style also allows one to pick and choose those ideas one finds valuable without being compelled to rely on more problematic ideas. As my goal is to be concise and clear, I will give little if any treatment to some interesting but expendable topics, such as the will to power, the eternal recurrence, and his sociological/psychological account of master and slave morality. While no discussion of Nietzsche would be complete without these, the intent here is to introduce Nietzsche *the existentialist* and focus specifically on his contributions in addressing issues of meaning and meaninglessness in contemporary Western society.

A good place to start is with his views on truth. Like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche attacks the view of truth as abstract and absolute, graspable by a systematic inquiry. Instead, he sees truth as the results of historical, cultural, and biological forces. Though uncomfortable with some of the conclusions of the Darwinists, he is clearly affected by theories of evolution. As organic beings, determined by a variety of causes, our thinking has more to do with survival and flourishing than with truth. Untruth, in fact, can be more useful for survival than the truth.

> Over immense periods of time the intellect produced nothing but errors. A few of these proved to be useful and helped to preserve the species... Thus the *strength* of knowledge does not depend on its degree of truth but on its age, on the degree to which it has been incorporated, on its character as a condition of life.[12]

We produce understandings of the world that fit our circumstances and our psychological needs; we don't discover it outside our experiences somewhere. Combining this perspective with observations about the persistent failure of philosophers to discover the true world, Nietzsche leaves us with a very deep skepticism regarding any substantive knowledge of a world outside our experience.

Nietzsche's most important contribution, as I see it, lies in his account of how this re-thinking of truth affects human values. Morality, for example, is the result of historical, biological and psychological

pressures. These have produced a moral compass that we take for true, but which is revealed as the cultural creation it is once we begin to look under the surface. That is, we take for true a collection of convictions from previous generations, which, if we are strong enough for the task, can be interrogated and exposed for the mere conventions they are.[13]

> But why do you *listen* to the voice of your conscience? And what gives you the right to consider such a judgment true and infallible... Your judgment 'this is right' has a pre-history in your instincts, likes, dislikes, experiences, and lack of experiences. '*How* did it originate there?' you must ask, and then also: 'What is it that impels me to listen to it?'[14]

How did our sense of right and wrong originate in us? The story of its origins in Western civilization is closely tied to the Judeo-Christian tradition. For various reasons, these religions appealed to people, not because they were true in an objective sense, Nietzsche thinks, but because they provided a comfortable and attractive worldview. The advances in human learning, particularly in the sciences, however, have supplanted the religious explanation of the world, at least in the West. It no longer serves its original purposes, intellectually, and it in fact has receded from the culture gradually but substantially. (Compare the role of Christianity in the daily life of persons and politics now compared to the Middle Ages.) It is for this reason that Nietzsche famously proclaims 'God is dead'. God, and in a broader sense the notion of truth as emanating from an otherworldly, absolute source and mediated by a priesthood, in various forms, is a fiction that we can now understand as such, if, again, we are strong enough for the task. Those that do will realize 'how much must collapse now that this faith has been undermined because it was built upon this faith, propped up by it, grown into it; for example, the whole of our European morality'.[15] Those few who are strong enough for the 'spectacle' of the death of God are willing to turn a critical eye toward their cultural traditions. They are 'free spirits', a concept that is central to understanding Nietzsche as an existentialist.

In Chapter 8 I will discuss the concept of the free spirit in greater detail. As part of this general introduction, it's enough to put this idea in the context of his larger observations on the human condition. First and foremost, the free spirit is contrasted with the 'herd', that is, the large majority of human beings guided by the comfort of conformity. Members of the herd mostly follow the lead of others, are rarely critical of their culture in any deep and penetrating sense, and, in fact, tend to

be threatened by those who would dare replace the old ways of thinking with the new.[16] In contrast, free spirits do engage their culture in critique, and they delight in the opportunity to rethink or create new values. Free spirits, then, see themselves as different and nobler than the herd around them. The herd dominates Western culture, however, and this is largely due to the authority of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Nietzsche particularly blames organized Christianity for encouraging a herd mentality and excluding any free thinking of alternative views. It is a primary reason why Good and Evil, as moral absolutes, have dominated our moral thinking; the Good is automatically legitimate, and Evil (whatever is contrary to Good) is to be shunned and punished. This is why the death of God heralds a new opportunity for free spirits; it is a weakening of the herd's grasp over the culture of Western society, a chance to move 'beyond Good and Evil', to use the expression that constitutes the title of one of Nietzsche's most famous books.

Much of Nietzsche's writing takes the form of encouragement to the free spirit, even if he doesn't always use that name. Though he isn't always consistent in how he describes this personality type or in the recommendations he makes, some basic characteristics are relatively unproblematic. The free spirit is often described as a warrior of sorts. One goes to battle, but the battlefront is in the realm of ideas. Free spirits work at attaining knowledge, so that they can understand where they come from, culturally, and how to critique taken-for-granted values. This is a war within oneself, then, and it is a condition for intellectual growth.

> And knowledge itself: let it be something else for others; for example, a bed to rest on, or the way to such a bed, or a diversion, or a form of leisure – for me it is a world of dangers and victories in which heroic feelings, too, find places to dance and play... And who knows how to laugh anyway and live well if he does not first know a good deal about war and victory.[17]

Notice that the warrior delights in the battle and that the battle is carried on within one's *own* beliefs. Challenging those beliefs is in fact a difficult enterprise, especially when established beliefs are bolstered by social and emotional supports. It isn't easy to challenge views that are familiar, familial, and assuring.

The warrior metaphor serves a greater purpose: self-overcoming. This term refers to the process of understanding oneself and creating distances between old and new ways of thinking, which then allows us to get past old habits and cultural inertia. But it's not just the idea

of the warrior again; when we overcome ourselves we make ourselves into someone stronger and more intellectually healthy than we were before. The free spirits create and shape their character through their *own* work, as opposed to the herd which is shaped largely by social forces. Self-overcoming implies a struggle, and that is a crucial factor in understanding Nietzsche's philosophy, for example, the *struggle* to overcome oneself, the fact that we have to strive, and have to develop and use whatever inner resources are necessary in order to succeed, is a mark of the free spirit.[18] The free spirit is vibrant and life affirming, as opposed to the values of the herd, which are often stagnant, tired, and sometimes life-denying.

It is not clear what sort of future world Nietzsche would hope for. Certainly he believed that he lived at the beginning of an era when the old assumptions, particularly with regard to values, were coming to an end and new individuals would appear to challenge us and move the culture forward. He says little about the sort of world we should aim for, and that is probably because he believed that the creative, noble types of tomorrow would have to work that out for ourselves. The first task, however, would be a complete 'reevaluation of all values', a task that he sees as the work of free spirits who would invigorate our stagnant moral culture and get it moving again.[19] Like self-overcoming, the reevaluation of values involves critically investigating values by understanding their source, throwing out what might be unsuitable for us, and keeping what is more appealing. The creative free spirits can do more than create values for themselves, then, they can help usher in a healthier era for the whole of society.

Phenomenology

While the works of eighteenth century thinkers like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche lie at the core of existentialism, it was not until the twentieth century that existentialism as a discernible philosophical and cultural movement emerged in the public mind. Philosophers like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Jaspers, Sartre, Beauvoir, Camus, Marcel, and Tillich were the stars that shone in existentialism's heyday. The stage was set, however, by a related but different philosophical movement: phenomenology, which had as its goal the task of systematically describing the nature of consciousness.

The two crucial figures in phenomenology are Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) and Martin Heidegger (1889–1976). Phenomenology begins in earnest with Husserl, who would rethink and restart the project on

several occasions throughout his lifetime. He attempted to found a scientific movement, that is, one that would yield certainty, providing an exhaustive description of consciousness and how it is capable of presenting objects of thought. Phenomenologists, according to Husserl, 'bracket' questions about the nature of objects as they exist in themselves, outside of our perceptions, and turn their attention to how consciousness is able to form objects in acts of willing, imagining, remembering, etc. That is, their concern with objects of consciousness is not with how such objects mirror nature as it is in itself, but with the way in which consciousness structures these objects.

After Husserl, phenomenology would evolve in various directions, including the 'existential phenomenology' of Heidegger. In fact, Heidegger is arguably the most important figure in twentieth century existentialism, in terms of theoretical development; his thinking establishes a phenomenological approach that would immensely influence Sartre, Meleau-Ponty, and others. Like many other great German philosophers, however, Heidegger's work is couched in formidable technical jargon that makes a quick and accurate summary challenging. Nevertheless, his eminence as an existentialist requires that we at least attempt to account for those points pertinent to the issues of meaning.

Heidegger's most famous work is the monumental *Being and Time*, originally published in 1927. He sets out to give an account of being, but like Husserl, this description is rooted in the point-of-view of the experiencing subject. The being that he is describing is human being, which amounts to our *consciousness* of being, but unlike the work of so many of his philosophic predecessors (most obviously, Descartes), Heidegger makes the world an integral part of that being. In fact, the term he uses to refer to this sort of being is 'Dasein', which translates into English as 'being there'. Our experience is situated in a place and time, and we are fundamentally concerned with the world. One cannot separate the world from Dasein, as 'being there' means being in the world, someplace, somehow. Similarly, the world (i.e., the world of our experience – the only one we are concerned with) can only be understood in terms of its relationship to us.

Others give the world to me, originally. I grow up in a certain community with its own sorts of understandings, values, and goals; and I understand the objects in the world in light of this enculturation. The computer that I type at, the car that I drive, the forks and spoons I eat with all mean something to me because of the purposes I have in employing them. I encounter them as an object used to accomplish my goals; and visitors from a very different time or culture would likely

conceive the same objects as something entirely different. However, I tend to just accept the given meanings of objects unreflectively. 'Being with Others belongs to the Being of Dasein, which is an issue for Dasein in its very Being.'[20] The others, 'they', have already established the basic meanings of most of the things in the world in terms of their expectations. This attitude, because it is not really mine, is an inauthentic mode of being, though it is the prevalent mode of being for Dasein.

Authentic Dasein takes ownership and chooses the meanings of the world it encounters, to some extent. Heidegger arrives at the concept of authenticity via an analysis of Dasein's contemplation of its own death. 'Death, in the widest sense, is a phenomenon of life.'[21] And at one level we all understand this, namely, that everybody dies and that we ourselves will one day die. However, we tend not to take contemplation of our own death seriously. Yes, one day I will die, but not yet and hopefully not for a while. Yet when we do honestly consider the implications of our death, we realize that all our projects and goals will stop existing altogether, and it then becomes clear how much they are mine and will pass away with me. Instead of being lost in the everydayness handed down from others, the realization of my own death makes me aware that the projects I am engaged in are not those of the others, but my own. Anticipating my lack of being altogether produces anxiety, for I am now concerned about whether or not I have lived the way I want. I realize the potential for different attitudes and possibilities, and choosing *my* views of the world and plans for the future is now a primary concern. 'Anticipation turns out to be the possibility of understanding one's *ownmost* and uttermost potentiality-for-Being – that is to say, the possibility of *authentic existence*.'[22] Authentic being, then, amounts to both an awareness of how my world has been hitherto constituted by others and my ability to choose among the potential life plans and interpretations available to me.

Jean-Paul Sartre

Among the philosophers influenced by Heidegger's work, the most famous is clearly Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980). Political activist, playwright, and novelist, Sartre was a philosopher who crossed boundaries and attained an international fame that few other philosophers have enjoyed. Since much of Sartre's main existentialist works were written during and after World War II, it is largely due to his influence that many people identify existentialism as somehow born of or connected with post-World War II European culture. (I think this association

between the World War II and existentialism is unfortunate, by the way. While there are certainly some connections, the important themes of existentialism stem from general descriptions of life in the modern world, or at least the world since the 1800's. The fact that Kierkegaard and Nietzsche both occur on almost everyone's list of the most important existentialists should be proof enough of how little impact World War II has on understanding the basic traits of existentialism.)

Sartre's existentialist writings are primarily in his early work. He would later turn away from an analysis of consciousness and the self toward a more social, Marxist perspective on human nature, and while this turn produces philosophical material that may be as important as the earlier, existentialist work, it won't concern us much in this study. Our concern, rather, will be with the work built on the shoulders of Husserl and Heidegger. Sartre uses their phenomenological analyses of consciousness as the foundation for his own view, but brings an original twist to it. In *Being and Nothingness*, he describes consciousness as a bifurcation between being-in-itself and being-for-itself. Being-in-itself consists of those phenomena that we are conscious of – it constitutes the *object* of our consciousness. An object of consciousness could be the world that we are experiencing with our senses, like the paper and ink you are currently looking at, or it could be something that you produce, like an imagined object, a memory, etc. (Following Husserl, we are only talking about objects as they appear in consciousness, remember. For the remainder of this discussion, consider 'objects' to be those appearances of objects within our consciousness. We are not talking about objects as they are in themselves, outside of consciousness.) Being-for-itself, on the other hand, is the part of consciousness that allows us to be aware *of* those objects. There is a part of our experience that is not identical with the objects of our awareness (e.g., I am not this computer screen that I am aware of); rather, the role of this part of consciousness is to be aware *of* these objects. This is analogous to vision; to see something, there must be both the object viewed and an eye that stands back from it and is able to gaze upon it. Similarly, in order to be conscious of something there must be both an object of consciousness (being-in-itself) and the ability to stand back from it, as it were, and be aware of it (being-for-itself).

Being-for-itself makes it possible to reveal objects because it is separated from those objects by nothingness. If being-in-itself consists of things, then being-for-itself is marked by the fact that it is *not* those sorts of things. That is, nothingness stands between me, as a conscious being, and the object of my consciousness. I am *not* any of the things

I am aware of. I am removed from them, and it is nothingness that creates the detachment and subsequent awareness. It is due to nothingness, then, that we are conscious at all. It provides the separation between being-in-itself and being-for-itself which allows us to stand over and against objects. Also, giving rise to nothingness means I am not a thing or object. A thing exists as fully positive. It is what it is and does not have the power to be something else. If I were to become a thing in that way, I would lose that separation from things which makes awareness possible.

Because I am always incapable of being any one thing or another, I am free. I am literally no thing, since the for-itself is removed from that sort of positive being. And that makes it possible for me to choose anything as an object of my consciousness. Put another way, if an essence is a defining characteristic of who or what something is (in the form of being-in-itself) then I have no essence. That allows me to choose whatever essence I wish, in a sense. I can interpret the facts of my life and take part in the kinds of activities that allow me to create a definition of who I am. In the same way that there is always some object to my consciousness, there is always some way to interpret and define the factual part of myself; but at the same time I never collapse into that definition and become a thing, not as long as I'm alive and conscious. One of Sartre's favorite ways of referring to this aspect of the human condition is as follows: 'consciousness is a being such that in its being, its being is in question in so far as this being implies a being other than itself'.[23] This is an incredibly opaque statement at first glance, but it does nicely sum up his view of consciousness: we are the sort of being whose being is in question, the sort of being which could be otherwise. Yet we always strive for a sort of essence or definition, something that we can never really become. That is, our 'being implies a being other than itself'.

Whether or not you follow this phenomenological account of consciousness, the important conclusion is that we are free, and our freedom is an essential characteristic of consciousness itself. Most importantly, we are free to choose the meaning of our lives. Nothing forces us or determines us to identify ourselves in any one way, so we can choose any sort of meaning to strive for. That meaning is constructed, on one hand, by the series of things I do, and, on the other hand, by how I interpret the facts that have occurred in my lifetime. First, since I am essentially nothing, since there is no inner essence that makes me, say, a writer, then it is only the act of writing that makes me a writer. But facts must be interpreted. By themselves, they mean nothing, and only in terms of my purposes and goals will the facts of my life and the world

around me get any meaning. Sartre gives the following example to illustrate this point:

> A particular crag, which manifests a profound resistance if I wish to displace it, will be on the contrary a valuable aid if I want to climb upon it in order to look over the countryside. In itself – if one can even imagine what the crag can be in itself – it is neutral; that is, it waits to be illuminated by an end in order to manifest itself as adverse or helpful.[24]

Similarly, all the facts of my life, whether they are actions that I have initiated or limitations imposed on me by external events (like a disease or an economic downturn that costs me a job) get only the meaning I choose them to have. That means I am solely responsible for my life. And with complete freedom comes complete responsibility. While it is empowering to know that I am captain of my fate, it may also be distressing. If I am not the person I wish to be, if my life isn't what I would like, it is ultimately up to me to change it or to admit that failure of nerve, laziness, etc. has been the motivation for my choices.

Awareness of freedom and responsibility naturally leads, then, to anguish and despair. We experience anguish when we realize that some consequence or other is ultimately up to us. It helps to understand anguish by comparing it to fear: 'anguish is distinguished from fear in that fear is fear of beings in the world whereas anguish is anguish before myself.'[25] The example that Sartre uses is vertigo. Imagine standing at the brink of a cliff. On the one hand, there is certainly fear of what may happen if you should fall; the effects of gravity, the rocks below, etc. are all external circumstances that threaten you. These circumstances are cause for fear, because these are things you cannot help. On the other hand, 'Vertigo is anguish to the extent that I am afraid not of falling over the precipice, but of throwing myself over.'[26] Nothing prevents me from making that choice. Similarly, soldiers fear a bullet, but they are anguished by the possibility that they may run or desert as a result of that fear.

While anguish results from distress over the choices I know I must make, despair results from the disappointment I have with those choices I have already made. I am nothing more than the sum of my actions. The meaning of my life is constituted by the real activities I have brought about as the result of my choices. If, for example, I want to be a writer but have never written anything, than I will despair over the failure to bring about the sort of life I had wanted. However, while

anguish is unavoidable, despair only occurs when we look back on bad choices. It ought to serve, then, as an impetus to maintain a focus on our really important goals and projects. 'The doctrine I am presenting is the very opposite of quietism,' explains Sartre,

> since it declares, 'There is no reality except in action.' Moreover, it goes further since it adds, 'Man is nothing else than his plan; he exists only to the extent that he fulfills himself; he is therefore nothing else than the ensemble of his acts, nothing else than his life.'[27]

Some people claim that the Latin motto *carpe diem*, or seize the day, is an existentialist sentiment. If so, it is largely due to the desire to avoid despair.

Given the difficulty we sometimes endure when acknowledging responsibility, it's no wonder that we often try to deny it. In Sartre's theory, that denial comes in the form of bad faith, the act of lying to oneself. This is a tricky concept. Unlike lying to others, where we are conscious of the truth even as we lie, in bad faith, the lie takes place in 'the unity of a *single* consciousness'.[28] Sartre does not think there is a subconscious, in the Freudian sense. His analysis of consciousness requires that if thinking or calculating occurs, it must at some level be a conscious activity. So when we lie to ourselves, at some level we are aware that we lie, though we actively try to avoid a full realization of it. For example, if I steal regularly from the local grocery store and tell myself that these are all exceptional cases and that I am not a shoplifter, then I am in bad faith. Deep down, I know the truth about my activities; I just do not wish to confront that truth directly.

Bad faith is a flight from the anguish that accompanies responsibility. This is often thought of as a denial of freedom, since responsibility arises from freedom, but really there are two ways I can deny the circumstances that create anguish. First, there is a factual side of my life, constituted by the choices I have made and the factual circumstances that surround me (e.g., my body, my social situation, the history of my life, etc.). Even though I am free to interpret the facts of my life in many ways, I cannot make anything at all of those facts. I cannot, for example, say that I can fly or that I am immortal. Neither can I deny that which I have done. If I have acted cowardly throughout my life, then cowardice is a reasonable characteristic of my self, whether I admit it or not. I am responsible for it, which is just why I may want to ignore it. In this form of bad faith, I try to become all freedom, denying the factual component of my existence. True, I am not bound by the past and can

always choose differently, but I am in bad faith if I think that none of the things I do define me.

The second sort of bad faith is to attempt to become all things, denying my freedom. For example, let's say that I feel I should actively protest the policies of the federal government, but I am also afraid that it will have a negative consequence for my career if I become known for doing so. In order to relieve the anguish of making the decision, I may say to myself that my role as an instructor requires me to be impartial, so I really cannot participate in an active political life. To the extent I tell myself I really have no choice, I am in bad faith. Of course I have a choice; *even if* my superiors expected me to maintain a sense of neutrality on political matters, I can still choose to risk or give up my career, and perhaps I should do that if the political cause is important enough. But if I say to myself that this choice is not open to me, because I am this thing, an employee of a university with specific expectations, then I am lying to myself.

In both of these general forms of bad faith, denial of freedom or denial of facts, I attempt to relieve the anguish of my situation by focusing on only one of the poles of consciousness. By contrast, the authentic person acknowledges the tension between the facts that make up our lives and our free ability to transcend these facts toward some other factual possibility. I am a philosopher, but I am in bad faith if I attempt to say that that role defines me and completes me. The authentic attitude requires me to acknowledge that while I am a philosopher, I could always be otherwise; the choice is always open, and I can never complete the goal of defining myself as that *thing*, the philosopher. In short, the game is to play at being something or other; but the authentic player knows that this game cannot be won.

Simone de Beauvoir

Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) was a life-time friend and companion to Sartre, and each had an obvious influence on the other's views. About five years after Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, Beauvoir published her own work on existentialism, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. This book is not as well remembered as her later work, *The Second Sex*, which is one of the most important works of feminism ever written; but it is in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* that she develops an existentialist perspective most fully. At the end of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre promised a book dedicated to existentialist ethics. He never published that book (though the unfinished manuscript was published posthumously as *Notebooks for an*

Ethics). However, Beauvoir's *Ethics* is widely viewed as the most likely formulation of an ethics one could draw from *Being and Nothingness*.

We begin where we left off with Sartre. As we have seen, Sartre views the fundamental striving for meaning as a 'useless passion', because one is stuck in a game that cannot be won. One attempts to capture being by becoming some defined thing, like a philosopher; but one's consciousness can never complete this appropriation of being, and if it did we would lose that separation from things which gives rise to consciousness in the first place. Beauvoir, however, suggesting that our passion is not quite so useless, extends Sartre's appraisal. 'It is still necessary for the failure to be surmounted, and existentialist ontology does not allow this hope', she admits.[29] However, we *can* 'win the game', but the game cannot be thought of as capturing being. The trick is not to attempt to *become* this or that kind of person, even if I freely chose that specific way of life; rather, the trick is to *reveal* the meaning that certain projects have for me while realizing that this way of defining myself is subject to reconsideration at any time. 'There is an original type of attachment to being which is not the relationship "wanting to be" but rather "wanting to disclose being"', she explains. 'Now, here there is not failure, but rather success.'[30]

While this is, I believe, an improvement over Sartre's view on how we create and maintain meaning in our lives, it is not a radical departure from it. What *is* significantly different than Sartre is her view of freedom as the result of a process of development. We are not free simply because we are conscious, as Sartre would have, and we are not all free to the same degree. Children, for example, have not yet realized their subjectivity. The child's world is a 'serious' world, which 'appears to him as an absolute to which he can only submit'; and for this reason the child's world is fundamentally different than the contingent, chosen world of the adult. What is more, there are persons who have never been able to escape the serious world of childhood, and while those individuals can exercise freedom, it is 'only within this universe which has been set up before them, without them'.[31] Slaves in the pre-Civil War American South and the Mohammadean women enclosed in a harem, for example, were never allowed the possibility of thinking outside of the situation imposed on them. 'Ignorance and error are facts as inescapable as prison walls.'[32] In sum, one is not free automatically but only as a result of the right kind of development. Being free implies having the resources to disclose meaning, which is largely influenced by social circumstances. In the second part of this book, we will consistently see how the role of others impacts our ability to find meaning, which I

believe will establish Beauvoir's developmental sense of freedom as preferable to Sartre's. (Though, as explained above, Sartre's view of freedom changed enormously to reflect a Marxian dialectic between a world of objects and a curtailed view of human freedom.[33])

Beauvoir's ethical position stems from the importance of being free and having the ability to disclose a meaningful world: 'to wish for the disclosure of the world and to assert oneself as freedom are one and the same movement.'[34] Our ethical responsibility, then, is to maximize freedom for both myself and others. We ought to strive for a world that is free from oppression and that provides the resources necessary for the development of freedom. Obviously I need my own freedom, so that I can disclose a world of my choosing; but I must also want a social world that does not threaten to curtail freedom in general. I should also want others to be free in order to *help* me disclose being. In a world where others are able and encouraged to disclose the world in whatever way they find meaningful, everyone is provided a larger pool of options they can utilize for their own pursuit of meaning.

Paul Tillich

The philosopher/theologian Paul Tillich (1886–1965) will complete this list of major existentialist thinkers. While there are other religious existentialists (e.g., Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel, and Martin Buber), I have always preferred Tillich's account of religiosity as a means of understanding the problem of meaninglessness and a possible solution to it. Tillich's broad vision includes both a Heideggerean account of human being and a rethinking of Christian symbolism, but the real strength of his position lies in his unique take on the nature of religion itself.

For Tillich, the essence of religiosity is an attitude or disposition toward the important questions about the meaning of life. In a popular article published in *The Saturday Evening Post*, Tillich explains: 'The decisive element in the predicament of Western man in our period is his loss of the dimension of depth'; and this loss seems to be the ultimate spiritual consequence of conformity and production. Losing the dimension of depth means

> that man has lost an answer to the question: What is the meaning of life? Where do we come from, where do we go to? What shall we do, what should we become in the short stretch between birth and death? Such questions are not answered or even asked if the

> 'dimension of depth' is lost. And this is precisely what has happened in our period of history.[35]

The dimension of depth, or concern with the meaning of life, is an essential characteristic of religiosity. 'Being religious means asking passionately the question of the meaning of our existence and being willing to receive answers, even if the answers hurt.'[36] It also means we no longer have an ultimate concern, one that gives a purpose and meaning to our day-to-day activities. Instead, our concerns are all fleeting, driven by productivity.

The dimension of depth metaphor is particularly useful in understanding the distinction between ultimate concerns and what he calls preliminary concerns. A dimension of depth invokes a sense of vertical space, and this is contrasted with a horizontal dimension. Values along the horizontal dimension are those day-to-day concerns about getting along in the world, from car repairs to getting a raise. Tillich directs his criticism at Americans (though the criticism extends to most industrialized cultures), observing that the pursuit of these largely material things has grown to such an extent that we have become detached from the vertical dimension. The concerns that make up the horizontal dimension have little to do with an ultimate concern, unless that concern is simply the attainment of more wealth and power. However, this leaves us asking, 'For what? What is the end of all the magnificent means provided by the productive activity of American society? Have not the means swallowed the ends, and does not the unrestricted production of means indicate the absence of ends?'[37] The answers ought to come from the dimension of depth, but that has been severed from our cultural value system. Without the willingness to even inquire about those answers, we have no meaning, so the effect of all this loss of the dimension of depth is pervasive meaninglessness. That, in turn, has dehumanizing consequences: we become cogs in the production machinery – things among things, capable of treating others the same way.

This view of religiosity makes the religious attitude distinct from the practice of existing religions. On the one hand, it means that people can be religious without belonging to any specific religion. In fact, it does not even require belief in God (at least not a theistic or supernatural concept of God). On the other hand, people who do practice an organized religion are not necessarily religious, in this sense. Those who attend church simply as a matter of social expectation or moral requirement but who have never placed religious questions at the center of their lives have never experienced the dimension of depth. They have

missed the essential religious experience. This view provides another take on the spirit of existentialism, as I see it; it identifies an inner state or attitude that makes individuals profoundly conscious of their ability to confront the problem of meaning. While I will apply Tillich's views directly to the characters of Ingmar Bergman's films, since I think these characters are always in possession of a religious attitude whether or not they successfully make sense of their religious beliefs, one might make a case that most of the films discussed in this book are religious films, in Tillich's sense of that term.

Perhaps, though, I should not play so loose with Tillich's views; in fact, he does think that there are better and worse ways to realize one's religious perspective. Specifically, he thinks that Christianity offers the best set of symbols for our modern predicament. The emphasis should be placed on 'symbols', however. Tillich does not believe in the traditional theistic God, a personal God that is a distinct thing. Rather, he conceives of God as the ground of being, or being itself, and the role of religious symbols is to point out how we participate in that ground of being. As existing things, confined to our own limited awareness of the world, we are estranged from God. In order to overcome that estrangement, we require an understanding of how people can simultaneously identify themselves with God while retaining their status as an existing person. For Tillich, Jesus provides the symbol for this link with the ground of being. Since Jesus sacrifices his physical existence for the sake of something meaningful that is greater than himself, he can uniquely play this role.

> Jesus is the religious and theological object as the Christ and only as the Christ. And he is the Christ as the one who sacrifices what is merely 'Jesus' in him. The decisive trait in this picture is the continuous self-surrender of Jesus who is Jesus to Jesus who is the Christ.[38]

That Jesus is the Christ is the revelation that makes Christianity the solution to humanity's estrangement from being.

> It is valid for the social existence of every human group and for the personal existence of every human individual. ... he is all this because he stands the double test of finality: uninterrupted unity with the ground of his being and the continuous sacrifice of himself as Jesus to himself as the Christ.[39]

That is, Jesus and the events of his life *symbolize* humanity's link with the eternal.

As this chapter is intended to summarize the major themes and thinkers in the existentialist movement, I have avoided critical reaction and focused on exposition. When I return to Tillich in Part II, I will argue that the Christian trappings of Tillich's views are not necessarily connected with the broader sense of religiosity explained above. My intent is to investigate Tillich's understanding of religiosity as a particular attitude, a dimension of depth, and leave aside a discussion on any particular religious creed, Christian or otherwise.

This account of the major voices in existentialism is, of course, incomplete. Not only have notable philosophers been left out altogether (e.g., Merleau-Ponty, Camus, Jaspers, Ortega, and Unamuno), but I have also ignored important elements in the views of those philosophers who did make the list. My intention in this chapter, however, is not to acquaint the reader with all the essentials of the existentialist movement in itself, but to prepare for a discussion of how film can be used as a means of investigating existentialist concepts. Specifically, the focus has been on understanding how select existentialists have addressed the issues surrounding the meaning of life, the primary issue that this book will deal with in subsequent chapters. While I have tried to provide a general introduction to those unfamiliar with existentialism, thinkers and themes have largely been selected with a view toward the issues to be discussed in Part II. But even in the remaining chapters of Part I I will make blanket references to existentialism. The reader now, hopefully, has an understanding of what *I* mean when I employ that term.

2
Film as a Tool for Philosophical Investigation

The previous chapter summarizes existentialist positions from a purely philosophical approach. While existentialism is most commonly thought of as a philosophical enterprise, there are certainly other means of conveying existentialist insights. For example, philosophers like Sartre, Camus, and Marcel wrote plays and novels with existentialist themes. Non-philosophers have also written works of fiction that have been described as existentialist; Dostoevsky, Hesse, Kafka, and Beckett are obvious examples. And films provide another medium where one can find existentialist content, as this book will extensively demonstrate. But literature, film, and other artistic media are not the same as philosophy, and there is considerable debate on how these artistic activities can impact the practice of philosophy. I contend that film indeed can be used as a tool in developing our philosophical positions, because it has a unique potential to describe the essential elements of the human condition. But what exactly does this mean? Can film *do* philosophy in some way? Or does it simply show us certain things about ourselves that philosophers can reflect on? To what extent can it contribute novel insights that are not easily attainable in the context of a philosophical essay? In this chapter and the next, I will confront the debate on these theoretical issues, identifying and resolving any difficulties that might arise from the use of film as a tool for philosophical investigation.

Theoretical versus personal approaches to existentialism

In the preceding chapter, I attempted to demonstrate that most of the existentialists are in one way or another fundamentally concerned with how we find or create meaning. But existentialism, as a philosophical

theory, is a way of describing or giving an account of that process; it is not the experience itself. For example, Sartre's account of consciousness in terms of the dynamic relationship between being-for-itself and being-in-itself is a way of talking about consciousness, and we can discuss whether that vocabulary does or does not capture consciousness accurately; but describing consciousness is, of course, much different than experiencing it. This distinction between a theoretical vocabulary and actual experience is important. In advocating that film can be a tool for understanding existentialist themes, there are two levels at which filmic insights can be directed: the theoretical, that is, the often technical and abstract way in which we give a description of what the human condition is like, and the personal, that is, the concrete experiences that we live. For example, from observations of the human condition gleaned from a study of some particular film, we might think about the nature of freedom, noting how the various characters feel responsible and anxious about the meaning of their lives. The film might be an occasion for us to discuss the relevancy of a specific descriptive vocabulary, like Sartre's account of freedom in terms of the dynamic between being-for-itself and being-in-itself; and we are then discussing the film at the theoretical level. But we might also empathize with the characters or remember similar experiences. The film has made us experience something of the feelings directly; it has affected us at the personal level. In sum, when we identify with concepts like anguish or authenticity by reference to our own experience, or perhaps even by experiencing these for the first time, the film has affected us at the personal level; when we consider the best vocabulary and descriptions to articulate that experience, we are approaching it from the theoretical perspective.

I want to consider how film can be used at both levels. Certain films can make us think about the adequacy of the existentialists' description of the human condition, but the films selected for study in Part II affect us at the personal level as well. These different ways of accounting for a film are interrelated, particularly in a field like existentialism, which is, after all, an attempt to describe human experience. Film isn't a dry, academic essay; it's a vibrant art form. Issues like freedom, bad faith, and the meaning of life are also vital to us. The first point to be made with respect to the adequacy of film as a tool for existentialist philosophy is that film's ability to help us understand the theoretical issues stems from its power to affect us at the personal level. By putting us in touch with lived experiences, we may be in a better position to judge the adequacy of our theoretical accounts. In fact, we might find that film can be a heuristic device in our theorizing of philosophy (or at least

existentialist philosophy); and later in this chapter I will argue that it indeed can. This is different than claiming that films actually philosophize, though many philosophers believe they do. Before making a full case for the heuristic capabilities of film, it is necessary to situate this project within the debate over this issue.

Can films philosophize?

It is obvious that movies can reach us at the personal level. But how might the insights from film, an artistic, largely visual medium, affect our ability to philosophize?[1] After all, movies are made for a variety of reasons, and few, if any, of the ones discussed later in this book are actually intended by the filmmakers to articulate philosophical positions. Yet many philosophers are quite convinced that film can positively impact the practice of philosophy. How, exactly, do the two relate? One commonly accepted way is to use movies as illustrations of philosophical positions. For example, many philosophy instructors use films as means of introducing subjects and getting students talking about issues.[2] Other philosophers believe film can do more, however, contributing to the philosophical discussion of an issue beyond 'merely' serving as an illustration of it. For example, Stephen Mulhall, in his book *On Film*, suggests that the *Alien* movies can be understood as statements and arguments on various philosophical themes, particularly those attending gender and sexuality. He sees movies as 'themselves reflecting on and evaluating such views and arguments ... they are philosophical exercises, philosophy in actions – film as philosophizing'.[3]

This represents one way that film can be thought of as a tool for the investigation of philosophy: that it actually philosophizes. If the view is correct, then it may be possible, say, to view my use of Antonioni with respect to Sartre's concepts in Chapter 4 as Antonioni's films 'reflecting on and evaluating' these concepts. Furthermore, the film-as-philosophy advocates suggest that the cinematic portrayal of philosophical concepts are a unique contribution, one that cannot be found in the verbal philosophical essay. The ability of cinema to *show* us philosophical insights sometimes surpasses the philosophers attempt to *tell* them. Jerry Goodenough uses the show/tell distinction in his introduction to an anthology dedicated to just this topic, which well summarizes the position. 'And therefore *watching* film, engaging both perceptually and intellectually with the cinematic events in front of you, can be another way of doing philosophy.'[4] That view really consists of two assertions: (1) films philosophize, and (2) films contribute something to philosophical issues

that the traditional text-based medium cannot. Philosophers of film tend to lump these together, and it's easy to see why: the first makes film a legitimate field of philosophical investigation, and the second makes it worthwhile for the practice of philosophy.

Asserting both of these propositions are correct poses some difficulty, however, as Paisley Livingston points out. If films are providing unique accounts of philosophy, something that philosophers themselves are not already doing, then how do we give an account of it? We can attempt to paraphrase the film's philosophical content, but that reduces the content to a philosophical account among other philosophical accounts; it adds nothing more than what we get from the traditional text version. Livingston posits the difficulty in the form of a dilemma: if on the one hand we say that there is *exclusively* cinematic insight into some philosophical issue, then we must doubt whether there *is* an insight there to be had; but if the insight can be paraphrased, then it isn't exclusively cinematic.[5] This is particularly a problem for those who want to articulate the insights garnered from film and apply them to traditional philosophical theories. If a film's statement is taken to be unique to the visual medium of film, then how can it translate into philosophical discourse?

Thomas Wartenberg offers a way of reconciling the horns of this dilemma. He admits that films are not *explicitly* philosophy, but they can do philosophy by providing thought experiments, just as Plato's allegory of the cave is a thought experiment that helps make the case for his theory of knowledge and education.

> In a thought experiment, the reader is instructed to consider a certain possibility that she might not have considered before, a possibility that often is at odds with her established patterns of belief and action. Once this possibility is entertained as a real possibility, then the reader is confronted with the question of what justified her customary belief rather than the possibility put forward in the thought experiment.[6]

To make the point, Wartenberg uses *The Matrix* as a thought experiment for Descartes' skepticism. Viewers are deceived about the reality of the world just as Neo is, providing an experience that makes a case for Descartes' skepticism in a way that cannot be matched by the philosophical account. 'It is the experience that viewers of *The Matrix* have watching the film that makes it more than an illustration of a philosophic text, that qualifies it as actually philosophizing.'[7] Similarly Wartenberg

thinks that Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* provides us with a thought experiment of Marx's claim that workers' bodies become machines. Chaplin's visualization of that phenomenon makes Marx's point in a way that cannot be matched in the purely verbal medium: 'the film opens up a way of thinking about the human body as machinelike that Marx's claim on its own does not.'[8]

I think that philosophers like Wartenberg unnecessarily presume a need for both the assertions I distinguished above to be true, that is, asserting both that (1) film philosophizes and (2) film contributes unique cinematic content to the issues at hand. While I think his arguments show that films can make unique contributions, I do not think it entails that films actually philosophize. Even if we use a film like *Modern Times* in a thought experiment, it is not at all clear that its use as such constitutes philosophy. I believe the core issue stems from the fact that films do not explicitly employ arguments or the other verbal devices of traditional philosophy. This is the position of Bruce Russell, who claims that film 'cannot produce philosophical knowledge, or even justified belief, beyond what is offered by the counterexamples'.[9] For Russell, philosophy must involve explicit argumentation. 'Because the answers to philosophical questions are controversial and not obvious, explicit discussion is needed if a person is to provide *justified* answers to such questions.'[10] Merely providing useful examples is not sufficient for philosophizing, Russell claims. It must be backed up by some explicit reasons and explanation about what these examples show and how they support some given proposition.

Key to this objection is the emphasis on explicitness. It may not be that philosophers are always producing arguments when they philosophize, but for the most part, the practice of philosophy involves explicitly making claims. This may take the form of articulating a world view or making structured arguments with premises and a conclusion, but in all these cases philosophers are attempting to clearly articulate relatively specific propositions about what is the case. Even when philosophers use thought experiments to advance understanding of their views, they are usually accompanied by explicit explanation or argumentation. The philosopher tells us what the scenario means and what conclusions we're supposed to draw from it. Rather than say that some fictional scenario is asserting a philosophical view, I think it is more helpful to say that *we* are philosophizing as a consequence of what we read or view.

I do not think that the films presented in this book are articulating much in the way of philosophical propositions, let alone presenting

premises or theories for a proposition. Films, especially good films, evoke a variety of intellectual and emotional reactions. Discussing a thought-provoking movie with friends is entertaining precisely because others can find diverse ways of understanding the film. But it may mean very different things to different people. Filmmakers themselves desire that reaction and are loathe to impose specific readings into their works.[11] Instead of identifiable propositions, whether intentional or not, I would contend that films are showing us, through artistry, things about humanity and the world that are ambiguous with respect to philosophical claims. Murray Smith makes this point as well: 'Few criticisms are more apt to strike terror into the heart of the philosopher than the assertion that such-and-such a proposition is "ambiguous," while in the world of art, that term is more apt to be used as a term of praise.'[12]

Of course, one might say that films *imply* specific propositions to persons who know how to fit them into a philosophical debate. Noël Carroll points this out in a reply to Russell.[13] So perhaps one can say that there are indeed specific propositions that we can find lurking in a film that are unstated but identifiable, once viewers are appropriately informed and know what to look for.

There may be some few movies for which this is true; but by and large, and certainly for the movies discussed in this book (and even for movies used as examples by Wartenberg and Carroll), it is difficult to think that there are relatively specific propositions waiting to be plucked from the film. Film is an art form, and as art, it cannot easily be reduced to specific propositions. The richness of the medium is more like poetry than philosophy, in that there are different elements at work which resist formulation in the manner of a proposition. Cleanth Brooks argues against the tendency to assert the meaning of a poem as a paraphrase, a general proposition that sums up the poem, and I think his observations apply equally well to film. There are imagery, rhythm, words, references, and other elements that may achieve a certain harmony, but they do so often with paradoxes and tensions between them. We do a disservice to the poem if we attempt to boil it down to only one specific meaning, as if the rest of the poem consists of decorative elements hung around the 'real' structure of the poem.[14] Similarly, the elements of film – script, acting, mise-en-scene, cinematography, editing – create effects and express attitudes and insights that may be impossible to capture fully in a paraphrase. Certainly, poems and movies may cause us to generate various specific propositions; film discussions often boil down to arguments about what the film means, or how best to interpret it. This seems perfectly legitimate as long as we are aware that we are bringing

these propositions to the work, that these are the meanings we find in the work. It is much different to claim that there is a specific proposition or set of propositions, which constitute the point of the work, and that the art makes *this* point.

My final problem with the thesis that films philosophize stems from what I think is a confusion between medium and content. Filmmaking and philosophizing are distinguished more by their medium (the methods and practices through which they carry out their activity) than by their content (the topic or subject matter). By and large, I do not think that films do philosophy because they employ a very different methodology: a medium of imagery versus a medium of words. This is not to say that many films do not deal with some of the same content as philosophy. Film indeed shows us something about the human condition, but I do not think it's quite right to say that film shows us philosophical propositions. With respect to existentialism, let us say that certain films and certain philosophies try to describe the same thing: the human condition. Each medium carries out its expression in a much different way, but they are expressing their insights on that same *topic*. *Schindler's List* may be thought of as saying something important about ethical commitment, but it is not 'doing' philosophy. However, we can reflect on what a film means to us and use the insights to formulate philosophical claims. That is what I think philosophers of film are doing when they use film to advance philosophical positions. They are interpreting film in terms of philosophy, but it is the philosophers who are philosophizing, not the film.[15]

While I will usually use the term 'existentialist' to refer to the group of philosophers who bear that title, I consider 'existentialism' to refer to a kind of content rather than a particular medium. There is existentialist theater, existentialist literature, existentialist philosophy, and existentialist film. Each of these may concern itself with similar issues, but all do so in their own manner, and each may have insights unique to their medium (though they may also inform one another, a point I will elaborate shortly).

For these reasons, I do not want to think of the films discussed in this book as alternative philosophical texts to be compared with the traditional verbal ones. To be fair to philosophers like Wartenberg, Carroll, and Goodenough, I do not think that it is wrong to say that films never philosophize. It may well be that some filmmakers do intend to make relatively specific points and are able to do so through the medium of their craft. But even Wartenberg admits that, aside from counter examples, films that do this are relatively rare.[16] Since I think that fictional

scenarios used in counterexamples are not themselves philosophy, I think that the numbers of films that philosophize are rare indeed. If you disagree with me on this issue, it will not make an enormous difference to the points made in Part II of the book; you will see the films discussed as making philosophical points, whereas I see the films as describing the human condition in a way that can be useful for philosophical investigation. What is important about this debate is how we approach a film for the purposes of understanding something like the human condition. If you do not think that the films are necessarily making specific points, then your reading of a film will be much broader; and you will be attuned for multiple meanings and the effect of general attitudes, all of which may enhance your understanding of the human experiences offered on the screen.

So what *can* film do for philosophy? It can provide insights into the human condition. Just as other philosophers use the work of sociologists and psychologists as evidence for their position, so too the insights offered by art of various types can show us what might be right or wrong with a philosophical view. They provide a sort of data that can confirm or disconfirm philosophical claims. There are two primary ways in which this is accomplished: (1) by offering narratives, and (2) by concretely representing characters, events, and perspectives through the variety of visual and audio resources of the medium. I will elaborate on each of these.

Narratives provide important ways of demonstrating how people might experience certain circumstances, which can be of considerable value for those, like the existentialists, concerned with how persons experience the world. Narratives provide context and specific situations that allow us to embody a concept. When Sartre discusses bad faith, for example, he makes use of short narratives, like a waiter in a café or a woman dating a man she is reluctant to involve herself with. These examples help us imagine how persons would react in similar situations, bringing the abstract descriptions of the for-itself, in-itself, etc. down to familiar lived experience. Much of the focus in Part II will be on the narratives offered by the films, through which we can think about how well philosophical descriptions of our experience work in specific contexts.

As important as the narrative element is, movies do more than simply tell a story. If they didn't, Part II might as well have included analyses of novels along with movies. Film as a medium depicts narratives in ways that novels do not. A description of a novel, even one with significant detail, does not compare with a film in the sorts of details it

delivers. Consider the visual information contained in a single frame, which would be impossible to describe verbally. The information and meanings contained in specific angles, light and shadow, and depth of field are difficult to deliver through prose and make the effect significantly different.[17] Most importantly, the filmic qualities make the narrative even more concrete, appealing to our own experiences in similar circumstances. We watch actors, flesh and blood persons (even if mediated through film), as they confront situations. Aside from grounding the narratives, the filmic contributions convey attitudes, moods, tensions, etc. which can cue us to the inner experience of the character or provide subtle, nondiegetic commentary.[18] For examples of films that exemplify these cinematic qualities, see the chapters on Antonioni, Fellini, and Bergman.

The films discussed in Part II will provide insights into the human condition. They are not philosophizing, and in most cases the filmmakers have little if any intention to explore the philosophical theme I will discuss, but they express certain ways of living in the world and reacting to situations that can help convey understanding about existentialist topics. Film can indeed be a tool for philosophical investigation, because its non-philosophical, artistic nature provides a unique perspective on the same themes that interest many philosophers.

Film and philosophical existentialism

The above discussion concerns the relationship between film and philosophy generally. This book focuses on the relationship between film and existentialist philosophy, and I think that the nature of existentialism makes film a particularly apt tool for investigating the philosophers' claims. In this section, I will explore particular issues that demonstrate the natural fit between film and existentialism, both at the theoretical and personal levels. Those issues are: (1) the representational nature of the world, (2) freedom, (3) the meaning of life, and (4) the social situation. It will also become clear that the two general features of film that apply to philosophy discussed above (that film provides narratives and that it provides concrete depictions of characters and events) are particularly well matched to the assumptions of existentialist philosophy.

1) Experience as the world represented

It must be remembered that existentialism has by and large been a descriptive enterprise as opposed to a systematic deduction about absolute human truths (and this is particularly true of phenomenological

existentialism). The goal of existentialist philosophy has been to describe life *as it is lived,* not to find the essence of human nature, as metaphysicians might attempt to find the nature of substance. That means the world we must deal with is the world represented to us in consciousness. Of course, we cannot avoid discussing 'the facts' – those aspects of the external world that impose themselves in spite of what we might prefer, but those facts are always interpreted. That interpretation infuses the world with a human meaning, a subjective quality, which makes the world *our* world. When Kierkegaard puts the subjective view of the individual over the unrealistic attempt of speculative philosophy to be objective, he is in essence saying that our *experience* of the world is what really counts, and that view is necessarily limited, particular, and certainly not the 'Truth' as an infinite being might enjoy.[19] This is similar to what Nietzsche has in mind when his Zarathustra advises us to seek our own truths and not the transcendent, objective goals of the Platonic philosopher: '"This is *my* way; where is yours?" – thus I answered those who asked me "the way." For *the* way – that does not exist.'[20] That does not mean that we should be viewing these representations as merely illusions or as false because they are subjective rather than objective, rather, when we practice existentialism, 'existence' refers to the product of consciousness as opposed to some state of things outside human consciousness. Reality, *our* reality, which is the reality that constitutes the life we actually experience, is that which is *represented* to us, according to the existentialists.[21] Normally, however, we do not spend much time making these philosophical distinctions. We usually just take objects for granted, thinking of the world according to habitual expectations and purposes. But as existentialists, we will have reflective moments when we know that life is a subjectively-imbued representation.

Learning about life from film is entirely consistent with this approach. First, movies are also mere representations of the world, though filmmakers go to great lengths to make us unconscious of the fact they are only representations. As spectators, we are complicit in this effort; we want to lose ourselves in the world of the film, momentarily suspending our awareness that this is 'only a movie'. At another level, however, the unique perspectives that the film brings to the story world, often guided by the stylistic features of the film, are a constant reminder that this is a different take on the world. In most cases, this is not how we view the world, but it is nevertheless a representation that we can take seriously while we are in the theater. Therefore, film can remind us that the world of our experience is simply just a representation, and in

so doing, it reminds us that our own accustomed representations are contingent.

Often when we leave a theater after a particularly powerful movie the flavor of that representation lingers with us; we continue to see the world through the lens offered us by the film. In fact, some films set out to make us conscious of the contingency of representation. Akira Kurosawa's *Roshomon* (1950) is a good example of this. In this picture, a crime is recounted from the perspective of several different witnesses, each with a very different take on the events leading up to the crime. No account is put forward as *the* account, the objectively true one. We are left to contemplate how people with different personalities and different projects (in Sartre's sense of that word) will perceive the events differently. That is not to say that there are no facts or to say that sometimes people are simply wrong about them, but facts have to be recounted in some fashion, and that means they must be interpreted from the perspective of the narrator. A far more common way for movies to achieve this effect is by simply adopting the point of view of someone thinking unconventionally about the world. Films like *Harold and Maude* and *American Beauty* serve as examples. They remind us that there are different ways to represent the world than the ones to which we are accustomed.

In sum, the fact that films are representations is one reason to think them a worthy tool for the study of existentialist philosophy. At minimum, the fact that films *are* representations does not discount them as a means of understanding the human experience once it's admitted that the human experience is itself made up of representations. More importantly, films have the potential to call our attention to the fact that we largely affect the creation of representations, which is a fundamental component of existentialism. They are capable of doing so precisely because of the nature of the medium: directly *showing* us how representations that we often trust as 'real' can be subject to diverse interpretations.

2) Freedom and film

By pointing out that subjects are free to choose how they interpret the world, we are also laying the foundations for the existentialist account of freedom. Movies can explore these forms of freedom in many ways. They can show us persons who are free and persons who fail to be free. They can also represent situations that challenge us, that is, situations that force us to think critically about our everyday expectations, thereby empowering us to think freely.

Consider movies that provide an alternative to the lives that most of us choose, showing that alternate choices are indeed possible. In *Easy Rider* (1969), the central characters celebrate the literally freewheeling attitude embraced by many young people during this period. The attitudes and personalities that Wyatt (Peter Fonda) and Billy (Dennis Hopper) encounter on the road are a far cry from the social norms typically expressed in films and television. Depictions of drug, sex, and the counter cultural behavior of the times offered viewers who would never have the opportunity (or the daring) to engage in that lifestyle the chance to do so vicariously. One effect, despite the darker consequences portrayed, is to make viewers reconsider the extent to which they are really tied to the norms and practices of 'normal' society. An alternative has been offered, and though few viewers are likely to embrace a biker lifestyle, the film does remind us of the contingency of everydayness: people can live otherwise, and can do so in radical ways.

Note, again, that the effectiveness of film lies not just in its ability to offer us alternative narratives, but in its power as a visual medium. Compare *Easy Rider* to Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road*. Kerouac's book has much the same effect on readers as I have attributed to *Easy Rider*. Still, it's not the same effect: the visual representation provides a different experience than the literary narrative. We see how the story looks as it is actually manifested in a tangible setting. We see, for example, how characters react to events, the expressions on their faces, the world around them, and their interaction with it. The characters, played by real persons, have a very specific presentation that adds a dimension to the experience that novels do not have (which is not always for the good). When representing the world, or, as in this case, representing a different take on the world, that representation has a vividness that gives film its unique impact as an art form. This is what characterizes movies' ability to affect our way of thinking about the world and challenge everydayness: with relatively little effort and time on our part, we can view a tangible representation of how different things might really be, and thus how contingent things actually are. As Peter Fonda said in an interview about *Easy Rider*, 'The public ... went for the picture because they thought we were up to something real.'[22] Whatever else he means by that comment, in part it surely means that the audience took seriously the concrete portrayal of an alternate lifestyle.

Another element of freedom often depicted in movies concerns the inner strength of persons, particularly in cases where the characters must stay true to themselves in the face of enormous pressures to conform. The goal of living authentically despite the pressures of society to

the contrary is one of the few moral goals to which existentialists are willing to commit, and it is a relatively common component of a film plot. Movies are able to depict both the strength and attractiveness of persons who have attained such freedom, as well as the difficulty in opposing a social world bent on maintaining the status quo.

Consider *American Beauty* (1999). The film's depiction of its central characters, with its insights into their psychological motives, makes it a good example of how movies can portray the challenges and triumphs of free thinking individuals. Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey) is a middle-aged man living the typical upper-middle class life in suburbia: a corporate job, a working wife, a daughter. Lester is also completely alienated from all three, unable to find satisfaction from the things that are supposed to be meaningful in his life. He rebels, abandoning hollow commitments to the status quo and living quite deliberately contrary to the expectations of everyone around him. The consequences are severe, ranging from a financially uncertain future to his eventual murder, for which nearly all the major characters in the film seem to have a motive. Still, the character's change is exhilarating, even if some of his behaviors are ethically questionable. By admitting that social roles can often be shallow for certain individuals, yet showing that the person is not bound to them and that a change to a more authentic lifestyle is possible, the film provides a representation of the free spirit in today's world.

Again, because it is a film, we see details of the representation that affect us more or less directly. We see how the characters are portrayed, how realistically they are like contemporary Americans, how they respond to conflicts and developments in their lives, etc. Films that effectively challenge us to think about freedom, or any element of the human condition, are able to do so in part because they appeal to what we think people are really like. Lester's character fascinates because Lester is in many ways really like us or similar to people we know. We see how plausible it is both for people to be stuck in meaningless lives and to challenge social expectations. We therefore see, literally, that freedom is indeed a real option for people in these (i.e., in our) circumstances.

Beyond liberation and authenticity, freeing persons from social conventions and giving them the power to choose does not always produce happy consequences; this is another aspect of freedom in which existentialism and film find common ground. Movies like *Silence of the Lambs* shows us characters who are not bound by social norms and yet are the worst of villains. This is also a consequence of the existentialist

take on freedom, and one that must be acknowledged. In fact, existentialist writers from Dostoevsky (in *Crime and Punishment*) to Camus (in *The Stranger*) have explored such characters. The fact that freedom can produce antiheroes as well as heroes has long been an objection to the existentialists' call for freedom,[23] but that shows again the suitability of using film to explore existentialism. We want not only to understand and illustrate existentialism through film, we want to be able to use film as a critical tool as well.

Yet another way that film can explore concerns with freedom is with the situations of characters who fail to be free. Take Jack Nicholson's character, Robert Dupea, in *Five Easy Pieces* (1970). He moves between jobs and locations, trying to find an alternative to past relationships and failures. There are moments of hope, when it seems he is about to commit to a life that he can authentically embrace, but at the end he cannot bear the responsibility that comes with such a commitment. He flees, which is embracing a kind of freedom, but one that is ultimately shallow and empty. In fact the film has a dark quality that grows out of the meaninglessness of Nicholson's character. While he reaches out for meaningful relationships, he lacks the courage to see them through. If one lacks the ability to back up one's choices, to carry them out, then one's choices are in fact limited. Dupea flees, and in so doing fails in his freedom to making *meaningful* choices.

This is the sort of film that can deeply affect us at the personal level. When we see portrayals of characters like these, along with the consequences of their actions in the lives of others, it calls attention to both the need to have the strength of character to realize our choices and the difficulty that social situations impose on them. We fear a character like Dupea because we know such failure is possible. We fear to become him, or perhaps we fear that some part of us is already like him. Though we often rationalize such behavior in our own lives, in films like *Five Easy Pieces* we see such a life portrayed for what it is. In short, as with all of the movies we have considered, a good film with existentialist qualities makes us think.

3) Film and the meaning of life

I have consistently pointed out the existentialists' concern with meaning, but of course many other sorts of ideologies make statements about meaning, from forms of nationalism to religious fundamentalism. One of the many ways that existentialism distinguishes itself from other attempts to find meaning is in the situation it places the *contemporary* individual, whose cultural institutions no longer bind people to

ideological absolutes as they once did. For the existentialists, there are only contingent sources of meaning, chosen meanings. As Sartre explains, 'Life is nothing until it is lived; but it is yours to make sense of, and the value of it is nothing else but the sense that you choose.'[24] Sartre's view of value as arising precisely as a consequence of choice is one of the main explanations of how meaning can be had despite the lack of absolutes or external foundations. Similarly, Tillich's distinguishes a horizontal dimension of everyday material concerns and a vertical dimension of meaningful concerns to suggest that the contemporary culture has emerged itself in the horizontal plane and sundered connection to the vertical; though for those willing to think about this, the vertical can be regained. In short, the real significance of existentialism, as I take it, lies in its ability to describe how individuals can make a meaningful life.

Much of what we have said about the other elements of existentialism in film aim at this goal. Take, for example, the notion that the world is an interpretative, creative representation of facts. That the world is such a representation, a contingent interpretation, means that the very meaning of our worldviews changes if we choose to interpret the facts differently. It is how we look at the world that gives it meaning, then, not the facts themselves. In *American Beauty*, a major theme is the ability to see beautiful in the mundane, even in garbage blowing in the wind. Most of us do not see garbage as beautiful because our attention is elsewhere; and even if we do have reason to notice it, it will not be interpreted as an opportunity for beauty to those thinking only of their next appointment. Even as films make us think about the world as a contingent interpretation, they open us to the possibility of finding meanings where we did not know they existed. The same is true for films that show us different options for representing the social world. In showing that there is an alternative to 'normal' Western society, the heroes of *Easy Rider* also show that different *meanings* are possible, (or for some, that meaning is possible at all). And as we will see in Chapter 8, the character Maude in *Harold and Maude* very clearly demonstrates the power of free spiritedness in contributing to a deeply meaningful life. By providing such examples and revealing possibilities, many films can be thought of as resources for the construction of meaning.

4) The social situation

Another element that constitutes the general situation of contemporary humanity is the effect of the social world upon us. While existentialists do acknowledge the role of society in shaping the individual, as

when Heidegger and Sartre discuss being-with-others, they are often left open to the criticism that they do not do so adequately. For example, Jürgen Habermas has done much to criticize 'the philosophy of consciousness', that is, the philosophical perspective that starts with the experiencing subject as the basis for understanding human beings. This is misguided, according to Habermas, because it fails to take into consideration the degree to which interaction between human beings (particularly communicative interaction) is responsible for the development of people into inherently social beings.[25] Feminists and Marxist scholars have also criticized the existentialist movement for not sufficiently acknowledging the role of socialization in creating the subject.[26] Anyone who wishes to pursue existentialism seriously must be aware of these types of criticisms. I think that existentialism is adaptable to them, for reasons I will pursue in the next chapter, but part of the project of thinking about existentialism from a contemporary perspective is to consider the effects of social context, both in allowing us to choose meaningful values and in creating the conditions by which we become free in the first place. It may well be that certain social contexts make it difficult for people to be truly aware of options, or they may not offer the ability to develop the inner resources necessary for making substantive choices.

Film can help us think about this aspect of existentialism too, which often amounts to a criticism of the existentialist assertions of freedom. In portraying social situations where the characters fail to choose meaningful values, not due to some weakness or flaw within themselves but due to the rigidity of the social environment or formative events in one's history, we are motivated to reflect on the dynamic relationship between the capabilities of the self and the realities of the environment. Take Alfred Hitchcock's *Marnie* (1964), based on the novel by Winston Graham. Marnie (Tippi Hedren) is unstable, a kleptomaniac always on the move, lying and changing identity to avoid detection. When snared into a marriage by her employer (Sean Connery), we find that her current personality is rooted in a troubled past, and particularly in some traumatic incidents in childhood. At the end of the movie we understand her more, and hope that she now has a chance for recovery; but the movie clearly intends to show us that her character is based more on the effects of what has happened to her than on what she chose to do. Her denials seem less chosen, less a case of bad faith, and more a natural psychological reaction to unbearable trauma.

Another example is *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971). The central character, Tevye (Chaim Topol), is clearly the product of his small village and

its Jewish traditions. In fact, given the challenges of life in rural, pre-revolutionary Russia, these traditions and his faith provide him the meaningful values necessary to get through tough times. Despite the richness of the village's tradition, it is also built upon expectations, strongly enforced, of social conformity. As each of Tevye's daughters makes increasingly untraditional marriage choices, we see how much pressure he exerts on them to conform; and it is thereby suggested what sorts of pressures he must have experienced himself. His initial inability to accept his daughters' marriage choices may seem to be the result of Tevye's choices to remain true to tradition, but the film strongly suggests that Tevye is the product of a traditional culture challenged by the rapid transitions occurring around him. One cannot help but be sympathetic to Tevye because we wonder how *possible* it was for him to act otherwise.

Both of these films succeed because they acquaint us with the characters, their environment, and their history in a way that allows us to understand how they have been shaped. This again, is the strength of film for such investigations: its ability to represent vividly the world in which people live allows us to relate to the characters and judge their plausibility in a way that more abstract philosophical or sociological accounts cannot. It is not just the narrative that provides these insights. After all, the above synopsis may well contain the essentials of the narrative, but it does nothing to convey the force this story has when we watch it on the screen.

Of course, we might in fact disagree that Tevye or Marnie are any less free simply because of their past. With the early Sartre, we might suggest that they are choosing to make denials or choosing tradition instead of change; but, again, the point of all this is that film is a ready tool for investigation of philosophical ideas, and the fact that we are led to the same debates in pondering a film that we find in philosophical discussions makes the case even stronger. A film like *Fiddler on the Roof* may in fact be a critique of certain existentialist assumptions, but that is all the more reason why it is appropriate to use film as a means of studying the accounts provided by the philosophers. A tool that allows us to see problems with or correct a theory is better than one that merely allows us to illustrate it.

It should now be clear that film as an art form is particularly well matched with existentialism. The very practice of film, as presenting alternate ways of being in the world, lends itself to thinking about the sort of existentialist themes discussed above. Again, the nature of the medium is key. While any representation of the world may also

transform our very understanding of it, the effects of cinema – the mise-en-scene, the acting, the cinematography – render the world in a way that allows us to concretely and vividly experience the filmmakers' representation.[27] And it is lived experience, not empty abstractions, that constitutes the subject matter of the existentialist movement.

Screening the human condition: The issue of realism

So far, the case for the use of film as a tool for studying existentialism has emphasized the ways these two different media are similar or complementary, but the goal of this book is to use film as a critical tool. That is, I contend that the insights we gather from movies can serve to corroborate or criticize the philosophical view. But they can only do that if we assume that films can show us how we really live. Are we as free as Sartre suggests? I will argue in Chapter 4 that we are not, based on the films of Antonioni. That implies that these films get something right, or say something true, about the nature of freedom. In that sense, I content that they are realistic. But the term 'realism' is fraught with controversy; film theorists differ wildly in how they use and critique that concept. In this section I would like to stake out a view of realism based on depictions of human experience, which includes both our experience of the spatial, physical world (the outer world) and the cognitive, emotional inner world.

As an art form, cinema naturally lends itself to assertions of realism, and some theorists, most notably Siegfried Kracauer and André Bazin, advance that feature as a primary consideration in the evaluation of film as art. Both emphasize the role of photographic reproduction as the element that lends realism to this medium. Kracauer represents the extreme version of this, since he so strongly eschews formalist elements, like editing or cinematography, in favor of the photographic image's more straightforward depiction of the physical world. In fact, he sees film as the great 'redeemer of physical reality'; that is, it brings us into direct communication with physical reality during an age given too much to verbal forms of relating to the world.[28] But the form of realism important for an investigation of existentialism is one that captures *experience*, not necessarily the physical world as it is. Bazin, I believe, offers an account of realism more amendable to this project, in no small part because he clearly identifies himself as a humanist in the existentialist tradition. Indeed, references to Sartre are numerous in his writings (though that should not be surprising for an intellectual writing in mid-century France).

As mentioned, Bazin's convictions about film realism are also rooted in the fact that film is a photographic medium. Because it is 'a mechanical reproduction in the making of which man plays no part', a photograph can capture the world without the transforming hand of other visual artists.[29] The psychological propensity to acknowledge the reality caught in a photograph is easy to confirm: we are far more inclined to grant a photograph of some past person or event verisimilitude than the most realistic painting. Whereas we always think of the painting as mediated through the artist, we feel we are confronting the subject matter as it is (or was). 'A very faithful drawing may actually tell us more about the model, but... it will never have the irrational power of the photograph to bear away our faith.'[30]

This observation is precisely what motivates my claim that film represents characters and situations in a concrete manner, with a far different effect on us than what we can achieve in a verbal medium. Cinema has the ability to create the impression of 'presence', and it does so in a way that is more effective even than theater. While we do have flesh and blood actors before us in the theater, they appear on a stage, and the impression is always that this is a staged event. In a movie, however, the ability to film the place, the realistic situation in which the events take place, provides a sense of presence that we easily buy into. 'What we lose by way of direct witness do we not recapture thanks to the artificial proximity provided by photographic enlargement? Everything takes place as if in the time-space perimeter which is the definition of presence.'[31]

In terms of filmmaking style, Bazin advocates for a kind of realism that maximized the camera's ability to record and report events, which he sees as superior to the traditional editing conventions that force the attention of the spectator. The latter approach, involving such techniques as shot-reverse-shot and close-ups of plot-crucial objects, achieves a certain psychological realism because it tells us what is relevant from the perspective of the characters, as when the camera focuses on the door through which the villain will soon enter. But Bazin saw this style as interrupting the action and imposing a specific interpretation of events on the spectator. Our attention is manipulated, and while that may engage us in a way that we consider realistic, it substantively removes choice from the spectator. Bazin much preferred the long take, deep focus techniques of Orson Welles and the Italian Neorealists, presenting a more complete and unbroken display of scenery and events. This is the sort of realism he believes cinema should embrace, a view

consistent with his existentialist leanings: the spectators, not the director, choose their objects of attention.

> Whereas the camera lens, classically, had focused successively on different parts of the scene, the camera of Orson Welles takes in with equal sharpness the whole field of vision contained simultaneously within the dramatic field. It is no longer the editing that selects what we see, thus giving it an *a priori* significance, it is the mind of the spectator which is forced to discern, as in a sort of parallelepiped of reality with the screen as its cross-section, the dramatic spectrum proper to the scene.[32]

Bazin's realism is in one sense very consistent with existentialism. The goal of portraying important elements of life as realistically as possible coincides with the existentialist philosopher's attempt to make philosophy a descriptive enterprise. Like Bazin, the existentialists sought to grasp life as it really is, and understanding the situation in which characters act is certainly an important consideration in using film as a way of screening existentialist experiences. Add to this the emphasis on freedom, at least from the point of view of the spectator, and it might seem that realistic films in Bazin's sense would provide the right content for an investigation of existentialism.

To some extent, it does. The films of Welles or the Italian Neo-realists do excel at showing the space, and thereby the situation, in which human events unfold and choices are made. But if our purpose is to capture the existentialist experiences described above, this sense of realism is too limiting. The focus on photography and capturing imagery puts the emphasis firmly on the physical world. Our concerns will more often focus on experiences such as meaning and meaninglessness, contingency, freedom, etc.; that is, we will study films that convey the inner life of persons. For that purpose, the editing styles that convey the concerns of the characters may be more appropriate. From the existentialist perspective, the sort of realism we are after is one that shows how human beings experience life from a more personal perspective.

To that end, Hugo Münsterberg, writing very early in the development of film, may provide an additional, complementary understanding of film realism. This is somewhat ironic: Münsterberg, in articulating his aesthetic, is a formalist who thinks that film, as art, ought to be divorced from the world. Nevertheless, in explaining how film conveys our subjective representations of the world, he points the way toward a different sort of realism than that of Bazin.

As a psychologist, Münsterberg wants to identify the 'mental mechanisms' through which we create the experience of a moving picture. For example, he offers an early explanation of the physiological process through which the illusion of movement is produced through consecutive stills. But his more interesting contributions come from an analysis of the cognitive functions whereby spectators produce a world and story out of the artifices of the filmmakers. Attention, memory, imagination, and emotions are all conveyed through cinema in ways that other media (theater, for example) cannot match. In the case of attention, Münsterberg notes that human experience consists largely of the ability to pick out relevant experiences: 'the chaos of the surrounding impressions is organized into a real cosmos of experience by our selection of that which is significant and of consequence'.[33] Film recreates this process through various ways, most importantly the close-up. '*The close-up has objectified in our world of perception our mental act of attention and by it has furnished art with a means which far transcends the power of any theater stage*' (emphasis in original). Memory of past events and imagination of future events are accomplished with flash backs and flash forwards. Emotions are conveyed through emphasis on subtle facial expressions as well as cuts to imagery that expresses the emotional state of the character.

> We recognized that in every case the objective world of outer events had been shaped and molded until it became adjusted to the subjective movements of the mind. The mind develops memory ideas and imaginative ideas; in the moving pictures they become reality. The mind concentrates itself on a special detail in its act of attention; and in the close-up of the moving pictures this inner state is objectified. The mind is filled with emotions; and by means of the camera the whole scenery echoes them.[34]

In short, the real advantage of film lies not in the ability to convey the spatial and temporal world so much as the inner world of our experience. Above, I suggested that film's ability to express the world as representation made it a particularly apt arena in which to try out existentialist concepts, and Münsterberg's observations are very much what I have in mind. Münsterberg himself, however, considers film unrealistic for these very reasons. 'The fundamental condition of art, therefore, is that we shall be distinctly conscious of the unreality of the artistic production, and that means that it must be absolutely separated from the real things and men, that it must be isolated and kept in its own

sphere.'[35] Part of the reason for this assertion has to do with a Kantian understanding of the role of art as separate from the practical sphere of human affairs.[36] But it also stems from his distinction between the 'forms of the outer world', which he identifies as space, time, and causality, and the 'forms of the inner world' described above, namely, attention, memory, imagination, and emotion.[37]

Though Bazin and Münsterberg seem to differ on the role of film as an art form, they seem to be in rough agreement about what realism means: representation of the 'outer world', the spatial world in which characters move and interact. (To be fair, Bazin does seem to think that realistic films present our *experience* of that world, but it is the world consisting of objects and places nevertheless.) Bazin embraces this form of realism, while Münsterberg is happy for cinema to abandon it in favor of 'the human world'. But for the existentialist, this distinction between the inner and outer world breaks down. The phenomenologists, remember, are willing to bracket concerns about the thing in itself in favor of the thing as it is represented to us in consciousness. We cannot, in fact, escape concrete and subjective representations in favor of purely outer ones: all our experiences are imbued with our choices, and the importance of objects and events are filtered through our priorities. Consider the photographic nature of film: there are choices about what to photograph, for how long, in what lighting, with what film stock, etc. Bazin was aware of this, and I do not mean to suggest he is naïvely realistic about the limits of film realism. However, I do want to suggest that realism ought to be understood in terms of *realistically conveying human experience*, that the film captures something accurate about how human beings experience things. To this end, realism is at least as applicable to the inner world as to the outer world.

That means that we ought not, with Bazin, downplay the sort of editing and film techniques that suggest particular interpretations of the world. Bazin may be right in advocating for more ambiguity in film and opportunity for spectators to find their own significance, but I see nothing wrong in presenting specific ways of interpreting the world that result from the choices characters make. We are free, after all, to think about these interpretations however we wish, and it may be that we learn more from seeing a specific world view played out than in being allowed to draw our own conclusions. On the other hand, Münsterberg is wrong to think that because film conveys the inner world over the outer world that it is for that reason detached from reality and from practical considerations. I have been characterizing the existentialist

position as one that makes choice, an inner experience, the measure of practical relevance.

Bazin and Münsterberg are far from the only voices on these issues, of course (e.g., we have already acknowledged Kracauer's take on realism, and the formalist Balázs, writing a few years after Münsterberg, provides another account of the emotional subtleties conveyed in the close-up[38]). But I see both of these theorists as articulating two poles of the realism spectrum, once 'real' is understood in terms of human experience. Bazin's approach to realism is important for conveying our experience of the outer world – the physical *place* in which human beings live and the situation from which they must make choices; Münsterberg's emphasis on the operations of the observer is better at conveying the inner world – the emotional or psychological states of mind. As I will argue in Chapters 4 and 5, Antonioni's films are a good example of the former, while Bergman's works exemplify the latter. But these are not discrete approaches, just general stylistic emphases. Antonioni's films clearly do reveal the inner world through the use of the outer world, and Bergman uses the physical setting of his films to convey insight into the characters' psychology.

So I propose we think of realism as accurately conveying human experience, and to that end we must attend descriptions of both the inner and outer world. Certainly maintaining both approaches broadens our options for reading a film, but more importantly this distinction helps us understand the sort of realism that philosophical existentialism is concerned with. As Sartre explains, consciousness is always consciousness *of* something. We cannot understand our inner experience without acknowledging that we direct our consciousness at the world beyond us. Measuring the existentialist ability to describe reality requires we consider both the outer world we constantly encounter and our inner reaction to it, though for various reasons we may want to emphasize one element over another.

Developments in film theory in more recent decades pose a different set of theoretical challenges for a view of film realism than the ones I've been concerned with, which will require that we extend the analysis further. The challenges, in fact, are substantial enough that they will shape our approach to film analysis as well as existentialism itself, and so the next chapter is dedicated to that issue. At this point, it is sufficient to establish that the use of film as a tool for the investigation of existentialism requires that we select movies that are realistic in the sense described here, that is, that they accurately describe how human beings experience life, and particularly how they confront issues that bear on the meaning of their lives.

Meaningful movies

Most movies are unsuitable for the purpose of this book. Films are made for a variety of reasons. Some filmmakers desire to create a meaningful piece of art, some are primarily motivated by financial gain, and most of them likely hope to achieve both these goals at once. The result, of course, is that there are vastly different types of film serving different purposes, and only some of them will appeal to those who wish to explore meaningful issues through cinema.

To begin with, there is little discussion of Hollywood films in Part II. This was not intentional, but it's probably not surprising if one thinks about how and why the majority of Hollywood films are made. During Hollywood's golden age, roughly the 1930s through the 1950s, business executives ran studios like mass production assembly lines. The goal was to make films quickly and efficiently, then sell them to a mass market. Scriptwriters, directors, stars, and anyone else in the production process had their specified roles, working together like a well-oiled, and very prolific, machine. Studio executives made the final artistic decisions, always with profit steering the process. The resulting movies were all very similar to one another in the themes and plots. As James Monaco explains, 'Always concerned with the essential commodity value of the films they produced, the moguls of the golden age of Hollywood preferred to make films that were *like* other films – not different from them.'[39] These movies were meant to entertain, and that usually meant explicitly *not* dealing with the harsh realities that constitute our lives. As such, most of them offer little for those seeking honesty or realism in a description of the human condition. That is not to say that these films are not worth watching. Masterpieces like *Singing in the Rain* certainly count as works of art on a level that might outshine some of the art house movies discussed in Part II. And philosophers have found plenty of philosophical content in the products of the Hollywood studio system. Stanley Cavell blazed that trail with *The World Viewed* in 1971, and books and articles abound on blockbuster movies in popular genres like science fiction, horror, and comedy.[40] But few of these can be construed as films with the existentialist implication I'm advocating: the realistic portrayal of meaning-of-life issues.

The story is different outside the US, at least through much of the twentieth century. Markets that were not so thoroughly dominated by Hollywood allowed a variety of styles and content to flourish (though Hollywood has certainly had its effect on foreign markets, to which the controversies in France surrounding foreign films will attest). Less

pressured by a profit motive, less confined by moral and aesthetic requirements for a happy ending, filmmakers outside of Hollywood were often more daring to express themselves and in so doing give an honest expression to the human condition. For example, they might intentionally keep the plot open or overturn our typical narrative expectations – strategies that make the viewer think, even if the experience may be uncomfortable and unsatisfying.[41] The resulting films aim less at pure entertainment and more at conveying important truths the filmmakers wanted to express. It is primarily for this reason why the majority of films discussed in Part II are from outside the US.

But the influence of filmmakers like Bergman, Antonioni, and Fellini also produced a sea change in American filmmaking. In particular, the success of independent filmmaking ventures in the 1960s helped change expectations about what might be feasible. Some directors, successful ones, were allowed 'final cut'; that is, the directors, and not studio executives, were granted the last word on what stays in the film. Others worked independently of major studios so as to avoid the demands of studio production. The sorts of movies they produced did not shy away from the human condition but often embraced it, together with questions about class, race, and other potentially uncomfortable social problems. Woody Allen is a good example of this. His films are discussed in Part II because they are very consciously existentialist.

> The so-called – it's become such a tiresome phrase – existential subjects to me are still the only subjects worth dealing with. Any time one deals with other subjects one is not aiming for the highest goal... I don't think that one can aim more deeply than at the so-called existential themes, the spiritual themes.[42]

It is precisely this sort of motivation for making films that produces the sorts of films that are sufficiently realistic in the sense described above.

Still, most movies are still produced primarily to satisfy a paying public and appeal to contemporary tastes for sensationalism, violence, romance, and humor. The continuing trend is to repeat financially successful formulae, evidenced by the growing number of movies ending with roman numerals. Again, such films most certainly entertain, and many are fine films in their own right; but if your goal is to find something deeply meaningful, your efforts are better spent elsewhere.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the way in which we can consider film a tool for the investigation of existentialist philosophy. Films should not be thought of as some sort of philosophical text. However, films have the potential to express certain aspects of human experience that are of interest to philosophy. They can be viewed as descriptions of how we live that philosophers, in their own medium, can also theorize on. This is particularly true of existentialism. Because existentialist philosophy focuses on experience as it is lived and appears to us in consciousness, the content of appropriate films offers alternate descriptions of our experiences; and these descriptions have the power to corroborate or reveal shortcomings with the philosophical descriptions. That assumes films are realistic in their depiction of the human condition, but it seems clear that at least some are, particularly when filmmakers are primarily motivated by artistic expression rather than commercial success. There is a potential for misunderstanding any assertion of film realism, however, so we must take care to narrow the meaning of that term. While the sort of realism that Bazin advocates may indeed be instructive, no less so is Münsterberg's account of the 'human world' that a film delivers through its unique stylistic elements. In short, realistic films, for the purposes of an investigation of existentialism, are ones that capture something true about how we experience the world. The films in Part II provide such content, affecting us first at a personal level, as works of art that have meaningful expressions of life, and then at the theoretical level, when we try to find a verbal account of that accomplishment.

3
Film Realism and Narrative Identity

In order for film to provide useful insights into the nature of existentialism, the movies discussed must be reliably realistic. This may be asking too much of films that are fictional narratives, however. Whether it is or not depends heavily on what you think 'realism' means; 'real' and its derivates are terribly vague and given to quite disparate uses. The concept is nevertheless widely used in film analysis, and in the previous chapter I have begun to situate my use of the term in the tradition of film theory. While not disagreeing with Bazin about the importance of the photographic medium to reveal the world to us, the important reality pertinent to a study of existentialism is the experience we assume of the characters, and that is often best conveyed through various stylistic techniques that Münsterberg was among the first to describe. So the emphasis on the inner world is just as important as an emphasis on the outer world, as long as it's understood that our intent is always to reveal *experience*.

Still, there are a host of concerns with the notion of realism. For example, the pressures to make profitable movies and the degree to which they appeal to what is already familiar cast doubt on the ability of film to provide accurate, useful descriptions. Going further, one can argue that movies often rely on expectations and conventions in order to seem realistic, and that means that they will tend to reflect relations of power, gender dominance, and other potentially harmful social norms. All this, the charge goes, makes film a tainted tool, at best, for reflection on the human condition, and decidedly not an objective measure of how people actually live.

In this chapter, I will confront this problem and offer a means to address it. To some extent, I find those objections valid; but I will argue that, even if true, they lose much of their force as objections to realism

when we compare the production of a film to the production of personal identity. By viewing the self as a narrative self, it will become apparent that all the structures of film that transmit the personal and cultural ideologies of the filmmakers are mirrored by similar structures within persons. If this view is correct, then the subjective, value-laden view of the world that a film produces is simply a reflection of the subjective, value-laden view of the world that individuals produce through their narrative construction of the world. In the final sections of this chapter, I will show that this is very much consistent with the general themes of existentialism, which can also be expressed in terms of narrative identity.

The problem with realism

The problem with saying that a film is 'realistic' is readily apparent when we look at examples of films judged to be so. Marlon Brando's performance in *On the Waterfront* was widely praised as realistic in 1954, but by today's standards its performances and depiction of life on the waterfront seems rather exaggerated.[1] And no matter how realistic a silent feature seemed during the early years of movie production, contemporary viewers will adopt a far different attitude. In many ways, therefore, our judgment of realism is entirely tied to the perspective *we* bring to the film. For many philosophers and film theorists, this fact alone is grounds enough for abandoning talk of realism. Surely a film does not convey what is real, the argument goes, if the perception of realism is tied to ever-changing cultural contingencies.[2]

Aumont, Bergala, Marie, and Venet advance this argument in *Aesthetics of Film*. On the surface it may seem that the reproduction of movement and sound that cinema allows yields a high degree of realism. The meaning of 'realism' in this and other works seems to imply something like 'the way the world really is', that is, being objective to some substantial degree and not being tied to specific or individual perceptions. Compared to other artistic media, movies have often seemed realistic, but according to these authors, that is becoming a passé presumption. 'The "realism" of the cinematic materials of expression is merely the result of a large number of conventions and rules, all of which vary according to the specific period and culture in which the film is made.'[3] It is convention, not some objective link to the world, which determines our judgment of the real.

More specifically, we judge a film to be real because it is *plausible*, and plausibility is determined by what we already expect, what we anticipate,

and in short, what we have learned through existing conventions. For example, the behavior of gunslingers in a Western seems plausible only because of how we *expect* such characters to act, yet few of us have the historical knowledge to judge whether the behavior is historically accurate. To the extent that the characters obey genre conventions, their actions seem plausible, or realistic. 'One may argue, therefore, that the plausible is established not as a function of reality, but as a function of already-established texts (or films). It owes more to discourse than to the real, hence, it is an effect of the corpus.'[4] In fact, the effect of the genre classification promotes these expectations: decidedly far-fetched plots are not seen as implausible if they are the norm for the genre. Consider the unlikely coincidences and misunderstandings in romantic comedies that we willingly overlook. Are such movies realistic, even if they seem plausible?

Worse, we may be promoting harmful ideologies when we encourage this sort of plausibility. By making use of conventions that make a movie plausible, we help reify and propagate these conventions. But conventions also contain assumptions about gender roles, social status, ethnicity, and a host of other values and priorities. The cost of naïvely assuming film realism, according to this worst-case scenario, is reification of existing sexist, racist, ageist, or classist values. Film theories stemming from critiques of gender or race provide a good example of these sorts of views. Laura Mulvey analyzes gender bias in her well-known 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. She describes the ways in which film portrays women passively, as objects of desire, and men actively, so that male viewers might identify with them. 'Women displayed as sexual object is the *leitmotif* of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire.'[5] Similar points can be made with respect to race: even with films that seek to avoid racial stereotypes, white protagonists are often more empowered then black protagonists.[6] If films (and it's usually Hollywood films that critics have in mind) are produced for the sake of the white male gaze, they surely do not portray women and minority groups as they 'really' are.

In sum, criticisms of realism stem from the fact that the real is often judged according to what is perceived as plausible, which in turn is assessed according to conventions. If this is right, then at best we are getting a distorted view of the world, filtered by preexisting expectations. At worst, our sense of what is real, and what is acceptable, is shaped by harmful prejudices. 'As a result, the plausible constitutes a *form of censorship* since it restrains the number of narrative possibilities

and imaginable diegetic situations, all in the name of preserving the rules.'[7] In terms of using film as a tool for the study of existentialism, there are two immediate effects. (1) At the theoretical level, we are using a tool that is supposed to be an accurate descriptor of the human condition in general, but it is hopelessly tied to specific cultural and historical contingencies. (2) At the personal level, freedom is a fundament of existentialism, and that usually entails freedom from the conforming power of convention. Yet if film is tied to and promotes convention in order to seem realistic, and if the plausible in film is actually a 'form of censorship', then it seems a mistake to say that film can help promote freedom since it is unable to portray substantive alternatives.

By and large, I agree with most of these observations; the case against realism appears strong. Films are not depicting the world or human beings objectively, the way they 'really' are, apart from social conventions, but *according to* social conventions that they serve to perpetuate. This is the essence of the problem with realism as it has been depicted since the beginning of film analysis, when, for example, Eisenstein claimed that film always makes an ideological judgment about the world even while it tries to reproduce it.[8] In short, it is impossible for us to find a view of the world detached from the lenses we inherit from society.

Yet I still think we can say that films are realistic; we just need to better understand what we mean by 'real' when we're discussing the human condition. The above objections only hold if we think that a realistic description of life requires some objective perspective that is detached and neutral to social milieu. I think that such a perspective, besides being practically and perhaps theoretically impossible, is not what we really want if our goal is to describe the human condition. As I pointed out at the end of the previous chapter, the existentialist perspective that we are pursuing here does not assume that sort of objectivity. If we wish to understand human experience, or the world *as it is experienced*, then we must ground the experiencing subject in historical and social environments. The self is always 'in the world', as Heidegger explains, meaning that the world is best understood as a part of what constitutes our experience, not apart from that experience. When I say that film gives us an accurate description of life, I mean that it shows us how we represent the world and the elements of our lives to ourselves. In other words, the representation of film may in many ways be largely subjective and determined by social conventions, but that is not a problem if we ourselves are largely subjective and determined by social conventions. I think this is in fact the case; and specifically, I think that we

can say that a narrative structure pervades both our identity and film, and consequently films makes a very good candidate for understanding the human condition.

Narrative and film

An examination of narrative and how it characterizes both film and human identity will pave the way for a rethinking of the problem of realism. We will begin with a general account of the process of narration, with particular attention to how narrative films embody this process. This will put us in a position to compare film narration to narrative identity.

Most theorists view the act of narration as being constituted by two fundamental elements: a story and a discourse of that story. The story itself, the sequence of events that establishes a beginning and ending to what happens to the characters, is not the same as the telling of that story, that is, the discourse. In a movie, this is often explained as the distinction between the story, which may involve events only alluded to in the film or surmised by the spectator, and the plot, which consists of the events actually presented on the screen.[9]

Let's first consider the story. As Seymour Chatman explains, the first obvious feature to note is the temporal ordering: a beginning, middle and end. Usually there is some conflict or goal that must be resolved, though movies vary greatly in how this is executed. (Some films purposely do *not* resolve the conflict, a tactic that Antonioni famously adopts in some of his films.) But in any story, there is a 'wholeness' that characterizes it. Narratives are 'sequential composites' that are 'related or mutually entailing'.[10] We always have the sense, while reading or watching a story unfold, that the events are part of a greater whole, which is why we are bothered if we cannot make the various elements cohere. This 'wholeness' is part of how narrative allows us to give meaning and purpose to the events related. And as Noël Carroll points out, film as a medium conveys a narrative exceptionally well, a point I have indicated in the previous chapter.[11]

The other major component of narration is the telling of the story, which usually requires both a story-teller (who may or may not be the author) and audience. In the case of a novel or spoken story, the narrator is obvious. It is a bit more controversial whether a movie has a specific narrator. David Bordwell thinks there isn't, because 'in watching films, we are seldom aware of being told something by an entity resembling a human being'.[12] As Chatman points out, however, even

a narrated event purely shown and not mediated by a narrator *per se* must be thought to have an author.[13] It might be advisable, in order to avoid theoretical difficulty, to avoid discussing a film's narrator and concentrate on its author. But even here there is trouble: not everyone agrees whether most films can be said to have *an* author. Of course, the director often comes to mind, especially if she or he rises to the level of an *auteur*, and that is where the controversy really starts. While for most purposes it makes sense to credit a director like Bergman or Fellini with the creative fashioning of the film – with authoring it – there are many films for which it is unfair to refer to the director as *the* author. Berys Gaut argues that there are always several individuals whose talents contribute to the finished product; that is, film is a collaborative effort.[14] I think that is a correct observation, so with respect to the existence of the narrators in a film, we are forced to say that there is almost always a collaboration of several narrators. Still, there is a telling of the story, and that telling requires a selection of pertinent facts, attention to questions that arise and how they will be addressed, etc. In short, there is an intelligent selection process that arranges scenes and creates the story, and whether that process is accomplished by a single narrator or not is irrelevant to the thesis I will develop below.[15]

The other essential component to telling the story is the audience that receives it. As Chatman points out, there may be a real and an implied audience, but to count as a narrative the story is being told by someone to someone.[16] The role of the audience is particularly important in understanding how narrative theories rely on conventions in order to seem plausible. The real audiences, those who hear or see the story and make sense of it, are required to bring a good deal of background knowledge to the discourse in order to make sense of the story at all. The narration typically contains a vast amount of cultural references and iconic imagery that the author assumes her or his audience is familiar with. This is true not just of movies, but of pictorial images generally. E. H. Gombrich has described how the psychological and cultural forces always produce a meaningful perception of artistic images. We never experience these images as some sort of pristine, raw sensory experience; 'the innocent eye is a myth'.[17]

A similar process is at work in constructing the story. As Chatman explains, 'the members of the audience must respond with an interpretation... they must fill in gaps with essential or likely events, traits and objects which for various reasons have gone unmentioned.'[18] All stories must use ellipses, for example, so that the events of often considerable story time periods can be narrated in a reasonable amount of reading or

viewing time. This filling-in-the-gaps on the part of the viewer/reader occurs constantly, making the interpretative capacities of the audience a crucial element in the narration process.[19]

Of course, these interpretations are due entirely to the particular times and places in which the members of the audience are socialized.[20] This point parallels the description of plausibility that we encountered with Aument et al. Our familiarity with previous stories have developed expectations about the plot, which make the film or book meaningful to us in a way that it could not be for someone completely alien to the culture. 'In short, the characterization of plot into macrostructures and typologies depends upon an understanding of cultural codes and their interplay with literary and artistic codes and codes of ordinary life. It relies heavily on verisimilitude.'[21]

So delivering a narrative is a dynamic, social event that requires a story, the telling of a story (whether by a single author/narrator or through a collaboration), and the interpretative capacities of an audience; and there can be no coherent story without a processes of socialization that makes the interpretations of symbols and common codes possible. This provides even more explanation of why a film's sense of realism is culturally contingent. However, if it turns out that our very identity is similarly structured, then cinema merely recreates the same sorts of functions that we always already engage in when representing life to ourselves.

Narrative identity

So far, we have examined some of the features of narrative and noted the large extent to which narrative makes use of social expectation. Next, I want to demonstrate that our means of constructing an identity is also an act of narration, and I will do so by arguing for a theory of narrative identity. That is, we are effectively narrators of our own life, and, conversely, one way to think about life is in terms of a narration. Furthermore, I think this is entirely consistent with the views of existentialism, and I will follow the discussion of narrative identity with suggestions for the possibility of a narrative existentialism.

To begin, we need to go beyond the study of narratives that we find in film or books to an investigation of how we think in general. Paul Ricouer does this in his three-volume *Time and Narrative*. As the title of this work suggests, Ricoeur approaches an account of narrative by investigating the way we impose a temporal order on the events of our life. There is an obvious and immediate connection between time and

narrative: any narration must take place in time. Any story told, or event recounted, must make use of a temporal sequence, just as Chatman and Bordwell observe. But now, consider how the mind constructs this temporal sequence and how this construction invokes a subjective element to what is usually assumed an objective fact. Even when what we are narrating are historic 'facts', we still bring to these facts a variety of subjective elements that enable us to provide a coherent story. Understanding narrative identity begins with an investigation of how this works.

When we appeal to historical knowledge, it is important that we really are in some sense accurate. As Ricoeur says, we 'owe a debt to the past', wherein we feel obligated to correctly reconstruct what went on.[22] But when we attempt to give an 'accurate' narrative of past events, can we end up with a narrative that mirrors events just as they were experienced at the time? Ricoeur thinks not, for many of the same reasons we have acknowledged above. While objectivity may be the historian's goal, we are separated from the past by the difference in our cultural traditions. To bridge the span between historical fact and our current account, Ricoeur uses the concept of the 'analogous'. Historical narratives are not the *same* as the narratives surrounding the original events, but they are *like* them, or *analogous* to them. We have to tell a story about the past that makes sense to us, given our conceptual schemes. This narrative may not be the same as the original narratives they are supposed to illustrate, but they are the best we can do given the cultural difference that separates us from the past world.

> This is why, between a narrative and a course of events, there is not a relation of reproduction, reduplication, or equivalence but a metaphorical relation. The reader is pointed toward the sort of figure that likens the narrated events to a narrative form that our culture has made us familiar with.[23]

The point is that we are not simply recounting facts in some objective sense. There is an interpretive element, based largely on the imagination, that allows us to recount events in a meaningful way. We don't simply report what has happened to us, we tell a story about it, creating a cohesive narrative. Furthermore, that story must be told within the meaningful body of knowledge that we bring to the text. Our understandings, values, and expectations that constitute our background knowledge affect what questions we ask of this text, and the questions we ask determine which ones get answered. 'The merely historicizing

question – what did the text say? – remains under control of the properly hermeneutical question – what does the text say to me and what do I to it?'[24]

When it comes to an understanding of our lives, we are doing the same thing. The text in this case is the series of events that constitute life, and we are both readers and writers of this text. Who I am depends on the story I tell about myself and the story I get from my community. If we think of identity as simply how we account for ourselves, then Ricoeur's theory suggests that our sense of self is fundamentally a narrative identity. This view seems quite intuitive. When we introduce ourselves to a new acquaintance, do we not tell a story about the events in our lives?

David Carr, in his book *Time, Narrative, and History*, gives a similar account of narrative identity, and he further demonstrates how intuitively plausible this view is. 'Narrative structure pervades our very experience of time and social existence', he claims.[25] Past, present and future call to each other and are more than just an unconnected sequence of events. A metaphor that Carr uses effectively, I think, is a consideration of notes in a piece of music. The overall character of the piece shapes our experience of notes. The melody, harmony, tempo, etc. all give a certain meaning to the individual notes that they could never have for us in isolation. Carr feels that the process of narrating our lives also has these same features: we organize the story we tell about ourselves into a past, present and future, where the important events of the past help decide what we find important in the present and what we aim at as a future. 'The narrator ... in virtue of his retrospective view, picks out the most important events, traces the causal and motivational connections among them, and gives us an organized, coherent account.'[26]

This coherence is similar to the wholeness or unity of a story described above, and it is worth thinking about a bit more. Carr distinguishes between a chronicle and a narrative. A chronicle is a description of everything that happens in the order it happens, while a narrative arranges the events in a way that will highlight the most important events and leave out the insignificant ones, putting them in an order that gives a coherent, meaningful account.[27] A chronicle of a car ride might include every house passed, every cross street encountered, etc. A narrative would describe 'the lovely old farm houses in the river valley', 'the thunder storm that made the minutes seem like hours', etc., all related in a coherent order that tells one of many stories that could have been told about the ride. In relating what I did today, or what I've done with my life, I do not, indeed, *could* not, chronicle the nearly infinite

raw facts that fill my time; rather, I narrate events in a way that makes the account a meaningful whole.

A narrative view of the self has several advantages. It is a view that is consistent with the misgivings regarding an essential self that many contemporary philosophers (myself included) share.[28] It also acknowledges the heavy degree of socialization required for establishing our view of the world. Despite the fact that he employs a phenomenological methodology, Carr, like Ricoeur, claims that our narrative accounts are primarily intersubjective in nature. This means that our identities are formed in large part because we learn what the various roles, goals, and values are from the culture in which we are socialized. We are told what it means to be a citizen, a patriot, the meaning of our gender and our ethnicity. Even though we, as individuals, may play a significant role in telling our own stories, we must shape our own narrative based on our pool of pre-established social meanings.

In sum, this account of narrative identity parallels the same sort of narration that we described of films: our lives are meaningfully related in terms of a narrative, which is told by a narrator (a collaboration of both ourselves and the social world we find ourselves in), and is received by an audience (which consists of ourselves and the people we communicate with). The narrative self is also culturally contingent and fluid. It is with these observations in mind that I can now make a case for realism in film.

The case for realism

A film, like our own lives, is not an objective chronicle of facts, even if it is a documentary; rather, it is a narrative construct. Filmmakers impose meaning with the material they capture on film in just the way we do when we recount the facts of our life, and *that* is primarily why movies can make meaningful observations on life: they reproduce the processes of selection and emphasis through which we establish value and meaning. Münsterberg makes similar descriptions of film, as discussed in the previous chapter, but without linking it much to narratives or the self. Others have done more to draw connections between film style techniques and the fact that the self is a construct, but my intent is to direct these observations at the issue of film realism.[29]

Selection and emphasis are key. As Noël Carroll points out, filmmakers succeed in making captivating movies because they call attention to those events that evoke an emotional response. Consider, for example, how the gun in the hand of a villain causes us to fear for the safety of

the hero. 'The emotions can be analogized to searchlights. They direct attention, enabling us to organize the details before us into significant wholes or gestalts.'[30] A film can therefore produce euphoria or disappointment when the expected result does or does not occur. As much as dialogue or voice-over, selection and emphasis is part of telling the story. On the one hand, this seems a complete fabrication and the result of the filmmakers' manipulation, but on the other, our life is only meaningfully conveyed in terms of this selection process to begin with. Narratives are not chronicles of neutral facts, they are presentations of value-laden episodes that make up a coherent whole.

A host of other techniques are available to the filmmaker to accomplish these goals. First, consider the effects of editing.[31] The editor's decisions regarding the length or order of shots have a profound consequence on what significance we assign to the shot. Just as someone who dwells on a topic for a long time is obviously betraying how meaningful that topic is to him or her, so a lingering shot of an object or event will make us think that the subject is significant. Or consider lighting. Usually the goal is not to reproduce natural lighting, but to highlight those parts of the scene to which the filmmakers would like to draw our attention. A person's face can be backlit, leaving the features in shadow, in order to heighten our anxiety about his or her identity; or we can highlight a face and leave the rest of the scene in darkness or dimly lit in order to dramatize the character's presence.[32] We could go on for pages: the use of dramatic music, slow or fast motion, sound effects, special visual effects, the placement and selection of props, the use of color, etc. In all of these, the filmmakers are doing the same thing that we always already do in our day-to-day life: choosing to focus on plot-relevant features that can cohere with one another to create a meaningful story.

There are obvious differences between the mechanical means by which a filmmaker selects and emphasizes the important elements of a story and the psychological means of creating emphases in our day-to-day lives, but the point is that the effect in terms of creating a narrative is essentially the same. Imagine a young man coming home from a war after a long absence, the family anxious to see him. He steps through the door, and for a few moments, the only thing that anyone pays attention to is the sight of him. While the living room sofa and coffee table are clearly in the field of vision of the assembled relatives, they do not notice these. In a movie, the director may decide to brightly light the actor while dimly lighting the room in order to mimic the way we emphasize the event that is an important part of the story. While the particular physical manipulation of the scene is obviously different

in movies than in real life, it accomplishes the same thing in terms of creating meaning: emphasizing the relevant elements of the scene.

If our goal is to use film to understand the human condition, then any objection to realism based upon the intended manipulations of the filmmakers are not points against realism but arguments for it. If we think of the self as largely a narrative self, then the blatant manipulations of the filmmakers parallel our own narrative manipulations. Again, while the method of telling the story differs substantially from other media and from the way we discuss our own lives, the overall consequence is the same: the production of meaningful narratives.

However, it is one thing to say that both film and personal identity make use of narrative structure, it is quite another thing to say that film narratives are realistic. My argument so far has been to claim that structurally the two are similar and to demonstrate why a realistic depiction of human experience will be subject to the procedures of selection and emphasis according to subjective preferences. It shows why Münsterberg's account of how film conveys the inner world at the expense of the outer world is an argument for a kind of realism. But earlier we pointed out that film narratives are affected by a variety of influences that seem to have more to do with changing filmic conventions than with how we really live. We judge a film to be realistic because it is plausible, the argument runs, and plausibility is determined by expectations and conventions, some of which may be unfair generalizations and stereotypes.

This is a legitimate concern, but it does not mean that cinematic depictions of how we live are necessarily unrealistic. First, there are many changing conventions about what the world is like that do affect our own individual and social narratives. That is, our own identities are also made up of changing expectations and conventions. As pointed out earlier, narratives are fluid and subject to a host of social influences. Portraying women as housewives whose main role is that of caretaker may seem an outdated convention, but it is one that the majority of persons took as true in the mid-twentieth century. Portraying a woman as a surgeon in the 1940s may have seemed unrealistic then, but it would have seemed so whether a young woman was contemplating her career opportunities or if it was depicted of a character in a film. Shifting conventions that determine plausibility are at work throughout the society, and are not for that reason an unrealistic view of how people actually live. This is not to justify ethnic or gender prejudices; in fact I think they ought to be revealed and challenged. Rather, the existence of social norms (even prejudicial ones) is not an argument against film revealing something

true about how we view the world, because movies simply reproduce views out of which we have constructed our own narrative identities.[33] I admit that films usually do *not* portray women as women really are, *outside* of subjective interpretations; but they do portray women in the ways that society generally does. Whether we convey the story and meaning of our lives to ourselves or to others, we make use of the automatic connections that the 'audience' will make in imposing coherence, whether or not they are riddled with unhealthy prejudices.

But this does not exhaust the extent of the objection. The conventions that shape movies reach beyond those we find existing in the society. That is, some of the conventions that determine plausibility are purely those of cinema. Genre conventions or the classic Hollywood formula that requires a happy ending with no loose ends have little to do with how people actually live.

This point is true enough to cause a concern for this position, but it does not mean that films are not capable of showing us something true about how we live; it means that we have to be selective both of the films we use and which part of the narrative we take as instructive. Light comedies, improbable action films, or formulaic romantic dramas may be fun to watch, but they do not contain much in the way of realistic narratives. (Note the discussion of realistic films at the end of the previous chapter.) In fact, many of the films discussed in Part II are so-called 'art films', which contain open narratives, a lack of obvious causal connection between events, and characters whose actions thwart our expectations. Such films are applauded for their realism on these counts, and the quick answer to the current objection is that for the sake of realism one ought to select these sorts of films over those that serve mainly to entertain.

But not so fast; some commentators claim that art films conform to their own patterns of style and narrative. Bordwell, for example, suggests that art films have developed their own conventions and that there are describable art-film expectations.[34] Art films just trade one set of conventions for another, then, but these are still conventions born of filmmaking, not of real life. I can reply to this objection, however, by pointing out that even if there are such conventions (and I'm not sure I agree there are) that they are motivated by the desire to make more realistic films. For example, Bordwell sees the role of ambiguity in art film narratives as a convention that arose from the need to make the contingent and unpredictable events that happen to characters seem more like what happens in our own lives.[35] These, then, are conventions not to be feared if our aim is to find films that convey what life is really like.

But there is a better reply to the objection, one that will give us a clearer idea of how to use films in investigating existential, ethical, or other meaning-of-life issues. A film will rarely be useful because the *overall* account of the narrative is just the same as the viewers' account of their own lives. In fact, few of us can name any film in which the events that constitute a fictional character's life are just like our own. Rather, it is the specific situations which are instructive. Even though a film may relate the life of a character completely unlike us, it may well contain specific events and relationships to which we can relate. While occasionally a film may be thought to be realistic because of the overarching narrative, its realism may just as likely stem from the depictions of specific situations which we can relate to, which seem familiar to us, or at least seem like ones we might really encounter.

This point also shows why the *fictional* nature of these narratives is irrelevant to their realism. Narrative situations, no matter how concretely tied to specific times and places, and no matter how fictional, provide schemata that we understand abstractly and through which we can think of similar circumstances, hence the effectiveness of parables in ethical instruction. Noël Carroll, while arguing that 'fiction films lack evidential support for whatever knowledge claims they might be thought to proffer', nevertheless believes that a fictional event can be judged as an accurate statement of how things stand in the world. 'I think that fictions often point to empirical phenomenon whose existence they intend audiences to confirm on the basis of their own experience and reasoning.'[36] Once again, the active spectators make the crucial judgments; movies give them the impetus to make those judgments.

So concerns about the conventional or fictional nature of film narratives need not dissuade us from finding realistic portrayals of the human condition in film. But sometimes a film is not familiar at all. Sometimes we are led to think of the world in a way quite alien to which we are accustomed, and it should be noted that this, too, has the ability to instruct us on the human experience; only in these cases we think about what *might be*, and not what *is*, the case. Films that surprise us, or even disappoint our desires for a certain outcome, may for that reason be instructive in thinking about the diversity of the human narrative. For example, the effect of leaving a narrative open or incomplete is not so much to destroy the narrative meaning, but to expand upon the possibilities of narrative. In short, these sorts of films make us think; they can expand our sense of narrative possibilities.

As a final word on this topic, it goes without saying that we should view all films with a critical eye. Certainly, some films will be so

unrealistic, or so consciously slanted by the filmmakers (e.g., propaganda films), that we may not be able to trust them as a description of how people actually encounter the world. But with other films, I think it is possible (and necessary) to separate that which helps us to understand the human condition from that which does not. Arguably, all forms of social discourse may harbor diversions, appeals to the lowest common denominator for the sake of profit, opportunities for hidden attempts at manipulation, and the like. This has been claimed of the daily news as well as ideologically motivated movies. That doesn't mean that there isn't some truth there in addition to that which we find manipulative. Understanding this requires that we approach all public media conscious of the possibility that they harbor potentially harmful biases.

Narrative existentialism

So if we adopt a view of narrative identity, we solve the problem with realism. But what affect does this have on our existentialist concepts, which are largely based on very different views of the subject? I think all of the important existentialist themes, particularly those dealing with questions of meaning, can easily be rethought in terms of narrative identity.

Carr begins to give an account of these themes in his discussion of narrative structures. He notes that it is descriptively true that there is a plurality of social roles that we may adopt in life and that this is reflected in the fact that we often change the story we tell of our lives; we can restructure it according to new goals we adopt or changes made in the interpretation of past events. We have already seen this, in connection with Ricoeur, as the ability to give different readings to our own stories. It is precisely here, in the narrative structure of the self, that we get another way of understanding freedom: where there is a story, there is a storyteller who consciously chooses the direction of the plot.[37] Very often in our narrative account of life, new experiences will force us to re-examine our story, and we may then be forced to make amendments in order to maintain its coherence. At this point, we can actively choose what course the events in our life will take, that is, what 'plot' we will follow. This emphasis on being an author gives us a sense of the distance and freedom an individual has with respect to values, as well as the contingency of values, that more closely approximates my description of existentialism.

Recall the example of the car ride given above, illustrating that the way we encounter the world depends upon past experiences and goals

we set for ourselves. The mileage-conscious person will be more apt to interpret the world in terms of how the terrain and performance of the car will affect fuel efficiency, whereas the person out for a Sunday drive will encounter the same trip differently. The former may be disappointed at the occurrence of several hills or curves in the road, the latter pleased; but there is nothing about the ride *itself* that makes us have to interpret it one way rather than another. On a larger scale, we can say the same thing for people who plan careers or other life goals: there is no essential reason why we order and interpret the world according to one life project over another. One might have been born to another family or in another community, or have made different kinds of choices earlier in life, in which case one's experiences would take on a different character; they would fit into 'the story' differently. It is in this sense that our values and beliefs are contingent; we could always, at least in principle, choose another way to order our life narrative and give it coherence, interpreting the past and future differently.

Carr stresses that the realization of this contingency of social roles hits home the unavoidability of making a personal choice:

> To do simply what others, or society in general, expect of me in my role as father, worker, citizen, or whatever, may indeed provide an answer to specific problems... What Heidegger and the other existentialists perceive, however, is that there is no necessity for my taking on any such role, no matter how clearly or unproblematically it presents itself to me, and that my taking it on constitutes a choice or possible choice of my own.[38]

So we can get a notion of freedom, and the ability to make authentic choices, from this recognition of our ability to write our own story in the face of the contingency of our existing interpretations. We can set our own goals for the future and act in the present so as to bring that future about. Similarly, we can re-interpret the past so that we pick out features of it that help make our story hang together better and give it the meaning we would like. But, again, whether we play a decisive role in defining our story or not, we cannot avoid the fact that a choice is always open to us. Nothing forces us to *have* to live according to one interpretation of our lives over another. This does not mean that we can completely exchange one narrative account of ourselves for another, but it does mean that we always have the capacity to distance ourselves from the current story in our role as author and to criticize it. For this reason, whatever life story I define, or let myself be defined by,

is my responsibility. 'The strands of my life', as Carr says, 'whether it is new and original or has been told and lived many times before me, is ultimately my responsibility, whether I consciously choose it or assume it by default or inadvertence.'[39]

Of course, the kind of freedom inherent in narrative identity is not that of all existentialist philosophers (like the early Sartre's), since we must certainly acknowledge the often severe limitations that certain narrative structures impose; but I see this as a benefit of a rethinking of existentialism in narrative terms rather than a detriment. For example, we might note that critical self-reflection and choice is essential to many of our moral concepts *and* that certain persons or communities are incapable of critique or choice due to the nature of their particular narratives. Perhaps I wish to hold persons responsible for being racist or sexist, but the extent to which they are truly responsible for their views might be restricted by their lack of ability to conceive of the world in alternate ways. Similarly, I cannot really accuse you of bad faith for clinging tenaciously to a particular interpretation of your life or for denying your freedom if that freedom is restricted by your social narratives. Rather than outright rejecting existential concepts like choice and freedom, a narrative rethinking of them allows us to hold that these existential matters are not so much the essential condition of all human beings so much as the conditions of specific human beings in certain kinds of cultural circumstances. That means that if we expect persons to think self-critically or from the point of view of others, we must also think seriously about the nature of the narrative identities arising from their social environments. While the radical freedom and responsibility of Sartre may be somewhat curtailed by a narrative identity, other existentialists, most notably Beauvoir, will find this a natural fit for their views.[40] Much more will be said about the limits of freedom and responsibility in Part II, where we will identify specific examples of these issues in various films.

So initial observations on our ability to narrate our life stories provide a rethinking of freedom and responsibility. In order to appreciate fully the way in which we can get a narrative version of existentialism out of narrative identity, it will be helpful to see how other concepts identified in Chapter 1 might look rethought in narrative terms.

Bad Faith. Sartre's notion of bad faith is central to any moral perspective one hopes to derive from his existential philosophy, and it is one of the most enduring concepts in the discussion of existentialism. Recall that in Sartre's theory, bad faith results from our attempt to flee the

anguish we feel from the weight of our responsibility by denying either our freedom to choose or the facticity which I have brought about through bad choices. Rethought in terms of a narrative self, one can make the same observation about the relationship between the story we tell about ourselves and the power of narration we have over that story. We might find that we don't like the story of our lives, and one thing we can do is to deny that it has any bearing on us. Refusing to include incidents of our life into the overall plot when such elements are clearly pertinent is manifestation of bad faith. For example, consider a man who tells himself that he is a good father, yet he has repeatedly passed up opportunities to spend time with his children in order to pursue hobbies. He is not giving an honest reading of the story that would unite his life's events.

Similarly, we can try to cling to only one reading of our story by denying the ability to give alternate narrations. That is, we can attempt to minimize the ability we have to author our narrative, insisting to ourselves and others that we cannot possibly be different than we are. Consider a woman who insists that she must remain in an unsatisfying and abusive relationship because she feels it is necessary to satisfy obligations she has made in the past, both to her partner and her family. Now, it is possible that she really does not have the resources necessary to alter the narrative, and it is unfair to many persons to expect them to understand options which have been denied them through a process of intimidation or learned helplessness. In that situation, there is no case of bad faith, rather, a lack of freedom to author a different life story. Perhaps, however, she is fully capable of changing the course of her life – of re-authoring what it means to be her – but she is also uncomfortable with the confrontations with those closest to her that would surely result. If in that case she attempts to convince herself that the story of her life up to that point has unalterably defined her, that it leaves no room for a substantive change in the plot, and that she must resign herself to the identity, goals, and options that have hitherto made her story what it is, then she is in bad faith.

Authenticity. The opposite of bad faith is authenticity (though this will be complicated by the discussion of authenticity in Chapter 7). For philosophers like Heidegger, Sartre, and Beauvoir, an authentic choice is one that is made with full realization of how it will have some meaning as a factual element in our lives, while at the same time it's a choice we make fully aware of the contingency of that choice. In narrative terms, I am being authentic when I choose to tell a story of what the events

of my life mean while acknowledging that I might well have accounted for the story differently. Of course, I must be honest about the reading that I give to life's events. Attempting to claim that I am a philosopher because I wish to be, when I have done little to read or write anything about philosophy, would be an inauthentic claim, though there would be nothing dishonest about stating that I hope to be a philosopher in the future. Heidegger emphasizes a slightly different aspect of authenticity: authentic persons make their lives their own by becoming aware and deliberate about the meaning they choose and not simply taking for granted the meanings inherited from the 'they'. In narrative terms, we find ourselves in a world where various narratives have already been established. We are told what it means to be a son, daughter, mother, father, student, teacher, grocer, etc. Parents often bring children up encouraging certain stories they hope their children will continue to identify with throughout life. These include narratives that emphasize the role of the family, religion, and other revered values. Most of us choose among these given narrative elements to some degree – we take from the 'they'. This may not be inauthentic, but we must understand that we ultimately have to choose these narrative elements ourselves. An inauthentic narration would be one in which we allow others to narrate our lives for us, or we never really assert our own power of authorship. In this case, we live out the life that others have chosen for us, never questioning the appropriateness of the story we have been encouraged to tell. In short, authentically narrating our life story requires that we make that story our own, that it be chosen by us because we find it personally meaningful, whether that story ends up affirming the social stories offered to us from childhood or is original and unique.

Religiosity. The approach to religiosity made famous by existentialists like Kierkegaard and Tillich requires that we pay attention to the quality, not just the content, of our view of the world. For Kierkegaard, faith in God imbues life with an inwardness and passion that alone can enrich life with its fullest possible meaning. Tillich's religiosity is thought out in Heideggerean terms, in which the appropriate religious perspective allows us to overcome a separation from the ground of being that is a persistent tendency of the human experience. For Tillich, religiosity is more of an attitude toward questions about the meaning of life and less about belief in God (particularly a personal, theistic God). For both thinkers, the nature of religiosity is in the how of believing, more than in what exactly is believed, and that seems to be the one consistent take on religion that unites religious existentialists. In narrative terms,

this translates into the fact that the story we author gets its meaning not simply from the fact that the content we choose is authentically our own, but from the way in which it affects us, from the quality with which we imbue it.

Tillich describes religiosity as having a dimension of depth, and one might think of one's life's story as capable of having such a dimension of depth. Such a story is grounded by some sense of deep significance; it's tied to an 'ultimate concern' which makes the story more than an account like any other account. Or, as Kierkegaard would describe the religious attitude, it allows us to be passionate about the meaning of our life story. In short, our life stories can be described not merely as authentic personal choices but as ones that have a meaning in a religious or spiritual sense. The how of the telling is sometimes more important than what is told.

These are only some of the concepts important to existentialism, chosen because they will be subjects of discussion in Part II. Some of these concepts are also ones that originated in a phenomenological language that makes them subject-centered, or rooted in what Habermas calls the 'philosophy of consciousness'. Critics of that philosophical approach often dismiss it because it fails to acknowledge the social constitution of the self; but in this section, I have attempted to show that the existentialists' concepts are not contained to the philosophy of consciousness. A narrative existentialism is clearly capable of acknowledging processes of socialization. Furthermore, thinking in terms of narrative identity makes it very natural to think of how film narratives can serve as points of criticism or support for existentialist views when the latter are also thought out in narrative terms. Films relate a narrative, after all, and it is precisely the portrayal of narratives and what they teach us about the power of narration that allows us to use films as a tool for the investigation of existentialism.

Conclusion

All of the observations made in this book, on both philosophy and film, are aimed at understanding how we generate and maintain meaning in life. When I argue that film can be used to describe life as it is lived, it should now be clear why that is: films, like our own account of life, are not objective chronicles of facts, but narrative tellings of facts by which we impose coherence. Meaning arises in the relationship that some events or characteristics have to the whole; it is determined by

the role things play in larger narratives. Filmmakers impose meaning upon the material they capture on film in just the way we do when we recount the facts of our life, and *that* is primarily why movies can make meaningful observations on life: they reproduce the processes of selection and emphasis through which we establish value.

It should also be clear by now that there are more than incidental connections between existentialism and film. These two media, despite being so different in their methodologies, share fundamental assumptions: the fact that we are always dealing with representations of life, the deliberate choices in how we present those representations, the explorations of alternate options in what life might be like, etc. The fact that film can deliver a narrative through the artifices of cinematic style gives it a dimension of verisimilitude quite apart from other media, which will become clear in the following chapters. As an art form that can yield insights into the human condition that are pertinent to existentialism, film is not simply an easy or amusing avenue of investigation; it is a uniquely well qualified one.

In closing, I think it is helpful again to recall the distinction between the theoretical and personal perspectives established in the previous chapter. The primary goal here has been a theoretical one: to show that there is no difficulty in using film to describe the human condition, despite the obviously subjective nature of film, and to suggest that rethinking existentialism in narrative terms makes the connection between film and existentialist philosophy even stronger. On the personal level, however, there are also substantial implications in all this for how we might think about the meaning of our own lives. Knowing that we are authors of our life stories and that we are responsible (to a degree) for how we tell those stories is potentially empowering. Many movies have an impact on us because they can remind us of the contingency of *our* narratives and our power to retell it.

Part II
Meaningful Movies

4

Antonioni: Meaninglessness and the Modern World

Film can communicate insights that a verbal medium cannot. There are obvious ways in which this is true, as images are fundamentally different in kind than words. But I have argued in the first part of this book that film, precisely because of its concrete depictions, can convey insights that inform even the abstract ideas of theoretical philosophy. Generally speaking, there are two ways in which it does so: through its ability to deliver realistic narratives and through the expressive nature of visual imagery. Different films emphasize these aspects differently, but it is the latter consideration which really sets film apart from novels or other verbal media as a means of conveying insights into the human condition. So it is appropriate that we begin with a discussion of films that exemplify the ability for visual artistry to inform our understanding; and there are simply no films better suited to this purpose than those of Michelangelo Antonioni, particularly his four from the early sixties: *L'avventura/The Adventure* (1960), *La notte/The Night* (1961), *L'eclisse/The Eclipse* (1962), *and Il deserto rosso/Red Desert* (1964).

These films examine the individual in the context of modern, industrialized society, where the pressures and momentum of life fragment relationships and distract individuals from deeper concerns, resulting in a pervasive meaninglessness that Antonioni brilliantly conveys in image and dialogue. They show that the existentialist concerns with meaning are urgent because of the world itself. That is, the search for meaning is an issue precisely because modern forms of life have undermined traditional sources of meaning. While the dialogue of these films helps make that case, it is Antonioni's imagery that simultaneously shows us the world in which persons are shaped while revealing their tumultuous inner life. Seymour Chatman, in his book on Antonioni, explains: 'The central and distinguishing characteristic of Antonioni's mature

films... is narration by a kind of visual minimalism, by an intense concentration on the sheer appearance of things – the surface of the world as he sees it – and a minimization of explanatory dialogue.'[1]

The focus in this chapter will be on two films: *L'avventura* and *L'eclisse*. In many ways, these movies require more work from the spectator, especially those unused to art films. Plot structures are unconventional and intentionally disappoint expectations, and the pace is certainly slower than the conventional Hollywood fare. All this is only a problem if you expect the film to entertain you along traditional Hollywood lines, however. View the films as powerful artistic depictions of the human condition and they shine, radiantly.

But before we begin thinking about these films in depth, it will help to lay some groundwork for a discussion on meaning and meaninglessness, and how these are affected by our relationship with the world.

Meaninglessness and the resistance of the world

Nearly all of the existentialists have something to say about meaning and meaninglessness, though Sartre's insights into the role of others and the resistance of the world to our choices are well matched with Antonioni's use of objects and imagery. It should be noted that while Sartre does make reference to meaning and meaninglessness, these terms do not constitute a primary focus within any of his major existentialist works (e.g., *Being and Nothingness*). Terms like 'anguish' or 'despair' are more typical of Sartre, but they are terms that nevertheless reflect a concern for the meaning of our lives. What *is* essential to Sartre's work is the notion of freedom; and in the early, existentialist work, this is a radical freedom. As we saw in Chapter 1, the very structure of consciousness makes us free. We are not bound by any particular essence; no object of consciousness forces itself upon us, which means that we are free to choose how we will direct consciousness attention. This includes the way we think of ourselves, and it is here that meaning arises: we choose our identity – the essence we aim for – and in so doing we choose how things in the world have significance. By themselves, factual events are neutral, meaningless, like Sartre's example of the crag we find while crossing a terrain. Only because I have chosen the goal of getting past the rock do I find that its size is a deterrent; had I chosen to be a sightseer, it would not have the meaning of 'obstacle' for me. Similarly, my past is an ensemble of facts that I cannot change, but their meaning, their interpretation, is up to me. Or, to use terminology of narrative existentialism developed in Chapter 3, I freely narrate the

events of my life. I can give any reading I like to the things that have happened, and I do so with an eye to future goals and current understandings. There is a certain plot that runs through my life and allows me to make sense of what I've done, who I am, and what I plan to do. Note, finally, that meaning arises largely because the decision is my own. *I* choose to disclose the meaning of life's events, and their meaning is important because of their significance to *me*.

The two crucial terms that Sartre uses in describing how we choose meaning are 'project' and 'situation'. The project is the overall goal or identity we choose to impose on life's events; it is what will drive the 'plot' of our lives. Of course, life occurs as more than a story that we tell. It is comprised of many events in specific times and places, all of which add up to the totality of our lives. These more specific situations contain many factual elements that are certainly not what we would choose, yet their *meaning* is chosen. Any situation we find ourselves in, after all, is comprised of a nearly infinite amount of possible stimuli, most of which we ignore. Consider your current surroundings. Look at some small detail that you have never before taken notice of – a strand of carpet, a bump in the plaster on the wall, etc. These you ignore, despite the fact that they are there, near you, in one sense a part of your current situation. But these little details play no role for you, because you have more important things to think about. They are not really part of your situation, the one that you are aware of and that is meaningful to you. You would describe this situation as the time you spent reading this book, because *that* activity is part of your project.

In brief, the situation is essentially chosen by us; it's not so much the circumstances we find ourselves in so much as what we make of those circumstances. It is the result of our reading of the factual components in any given time or place according to the project we have chosen. So, situation is an interpretation of the facts as viewed through the lens of a specific project. Stuck in a traffic jam? The meaning of this situation involves anger and frustration if the project you are engaged in is getting to work on time. The situation means something else entirely if your project is to kill time or break in the new car stereo.[2] 'It is by the assumption of this contingency and by its surpassing that there can be at once a *choice* and an organization of things *in situation*... Thus I am absolutely free and absolutely responsible for my situation.'[3] And now the concepts of despair and anguish, described in Chapter 1, have a greater connection to the meaning of life. I am anguished, in part, because it is up to me to choose a project, or set of projects, that will give meaning to my life and the situations in which I find myself. I

despair if I have failed to act on my chosen project or let myself be defined by others' projects.

There are hierarchies of projects, according to Sartre. This is intuitively clear for many mundane activities. The project of 'driving to work' is really part of a larger project of 'having a career', which may in turn be part of the larger project of 'supporting the family', etc. Sartre thinks there is an original or fundamental project that provides the ultimate meaning behind all the more local projects. The basis for his psychoanalysis, in fact, is a therapy in which clients and therapist discuss various interpretations of the client's behavior until therapist and client together find the original project. 'That is why a special method must aim at detaching the fundamental meaning which the project admits and which can be only the individual secret of the subject's being-in-the-world.'[4] In terms of a narrative existentialism, we might say that there is one underlying plot to our life, which we may or may not be explicitly aware of, and all other narrative features by which we identify ourselves are made significant by their involvement in that overall plot – the grand narrative of life.

I doubt if there is such an original project. I see no reason to believe that there may not be different projects for the different roles I play, which need not necessarily require that one be derivative of the other. The role I play in a family gathering is quite different than the one I play with students in a classroom, and there are correspondingly different meanings that the factual events of my life have in these different situations. It is enough to find the *pertinent* project, or narrative, in order to understand those meanings. That there should be some deep project to which they all answer is questionable, particularly in light of criticisms of unified identity that one can find in Nietzsche and various postmodernists.[5] This goes beyond the scope of this paper, however. Sartre's point is that meanings are established though our chosen interpretation of events in the context of a situation, driven by projects that represent our goals and values. Certainly some events are more meaningful than others because the projects are more important to us, regardless of whether or not there is an ultimate project.

In sum, a meaningful life will be one where I choose a fulfilling project that I actually carry out and guide my actions by. I must acknowledge the contingency of this project, but I must also acknowledge that it is through my choice that the events in my life have the meaning they do. My life will be meaningless to the extent that I fail to actualize what I choose to be, or live in bad faith about what my project amounts to, or allow others to choose for me in ways that are unfulfilling. Because

of Sartre's radical freedom, it is always up to us to find meaning. Can the world resist our attempts to find it? Certainly – we can be denied those options that are meaningful to us, which is true of people who are oppressed. But Sartre, at least in the period of *Being and Nothingness*, emphasizes the fact that what we choose is never forced. We are always capable of finding alternate meanings.

But is this really true? Can the world make it difficult, or even impossible, for some persons to make meaningful choices? I suggest that the answer to this question may well be 'yes', that we may need to pull back from Sartre's radical freedom (as he himself did in later works, like *Search for a Method* and *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*). The modern world can affect our freedom, not just in terms of the options we have but in our very ability to choose. Antonioni's films will allow us to consider the human condition from particular situations, and it is through them that we can better understand the possible shortcomings in Sartre's views.

L'avventura

When the first movie of this series, *L'avventura*, debuted at the 1960 Cannes festival, it provoked open displays of hostility; the audience was not initially prepared to read the film for what it had to offer. Nevertheless, it won the Special Jury Award 'for a new movie language and the beauty of its images', and it would eventually be recognized as one of the best and most important films of the sixties. The 'new movie language' together with the unconventional narrative structures means that these movies will require some effort on the part of the viewer. For those unfamiliar with Antonioni's work, it might help to keep in mind that each scene is by itself a significant statement of the artist's intentions; thinking about the individual scenes is as or more worthwhile than thinking about the meaning of the plot as a whole. The imagery and editing decisions bear far more weight in conveying observations about the human condition than what you will find in other films, and it usually requires multiple viewings to appreciate them fully.

Antonioni's films are obvious candidates for any cinematic investigation of existentialism. In fact, many commentators have described these as films of existentialist alienation. Antonioni himself acknowledges the influence of existentialism as a movement on his films, though he claims he is not attempting to make any particular philosophical point.

> Existentialism, and later on phenomenology, are two philosophies that I felt very close to. It is possible to see them reflected in my films,

> but I have never been a man of learning who interpreted everything through culture. My way of seeing is in the eye, I believe in the force of the image, of its internal rhythm.[6]

From this comment, we might expect almost literally to *see* existentialist themes in these films, and in a sense, we do. But there are no clearly articulated theses. There is no particular philosophical statement being made and, as I argued in Chapter 2, we shouldn't assume that this medium will deliver such. Yet all the films from this period are so rich in content that we will have ample opportunity to draw our own philosophical conclusions.

Let's begin with the plot. In *L'avventura*, the film begins when Anna (Lea Massari) and her friend Claudia (Monica Vitti) set out to meet Anna's fiancé, Sandro (Gabriele Ferzetti). The meeting between the two lovers is awkward, as the two had been apart for several weeks, and it culminates in passionless sex. The three then join wealthy friends on a cruise of the Aeolian Islands, which is intended to be part of an extended tour of Sicilian estates and resorts. However, when the party explores a small, desolate island, Anna disappears. Sandro, along with Claudia and another member of their party, stay behind while others go for help. Their search for Anna is unsuccessful, but Sandro begins to turn his romantic attentions to Claudia within hours of Anna's disappearance. As the search for Anna shifts from the island to Sicily, Sandro and Claudia separate, but when Sandro bribes a columnist to print a story reporting a sighting of Anna – as a means of luring Claudia – the two are united again. Within a few days, they effectively abandon their search and surrender to their infatuation, which alternates (especially for Claudia) between euphoria and misgivings. After being reunited with the rest of the party at a resort hotel, Sandro leaves an exhausted Anna in her room and joins the others. When he hasn't returned in the morning, a distressed Claudia searches the hotel lounges and finds Sandro still embracing the prostitute he spent the night with. Both flee in disgust and horror, but in the final scene, Claudia approaches a weeping Sandro and hesitantly strokes the back of his head.

The plot description by itself reveals little of what the film has to offer; the essential elements of the movie lie in the way that the characters and their situations are portrayed. The film focuses on the relationship between the characters, and the meaninglessness of their lives is demonstrated through its effect on these relationships. As commentators typically point out, the characters in Antonioni films are alienated from one another. This is certainly true, and it is a large part of the

meaninglessness conveyed in the film. Anna understands how empty her relationship with Sandro is, and despite their best efforts, Sandro and Claudia can never bridge the gap between them. But this distance stems from a deeper problem, a pervasive meaninglessness operating at the social and cultural level. The situation is similar to Marx's description of worker alienation under capitalism. Marx thinks that because workers are so thoroughly alienated from their very humanity, they are necessarily alienated from one another as well. They cannot relate to one another in a healthy human manner if they cannot relate to themselves that way.[7] Similarly, with many of the characters in Antonioni's films from this period (particularly the males), characters cannot make healthy human connections because they have no meaningful sense of self from which to relate to others.

We find out *that* the characters are distanced from one another before we understand why. Near the beginning of the film, when Anna meets Sandro (with Claudia in tow) at Sandro's villa, Anna's first impulse is to leave before he sees her. But he spots her before she has a chance, and instead of waiting for him to come down, she races up the stairs to greet him. The camera watches her enter the building from inside the front door, showing her conspicuously passing through it, leaving her friend Claudia on the outside, framed by the door. The rooms are full of dramatic arches that segment the room, dividing the spaces. No lovers' embrace, here: Anna keeps her distance from Sandro, and Antonioni uses the divisions within the room to effect that separation. She opens the doors on his balcony and steps out, and though they're together, a deeper separation is suggested by the architecture of the room. After trading wooden poses, she returns from the balcony but still keeps her distance, using a low wooden beam dividing the room to separate them. The first movement she makes toward him is through undressing as an obvious prelude to sex. As they embrace, Claudia waits below, framed through the window, and Sandro closes the curtains, completing the sense of separation. There's little need for dialogue here: the imagery conveys the sense of isolation that Anna experiences first in relation to Sandro, and as a result of that to the rest of the world.

This little 'adventure' the two share will be a recurring theme in many of Antonioni's films: the use of sex as a means of avoiding more serious issues. Seymour Chatman refers to this as 'anodyne sex', or sex whose function is simply to cover pain or emptiness. 'Anodyne eroticism wards off the boredom and despair that accompany the unconscious refusal to make one's life meaningful. It does not itself reflect deep passion: on the contrary, it is a rejection, even a flight from passion.'[8] This sort

of sexuality is predominant in all four of these movies from the early sixties, and Antonioni seems to think it a symptom of the problems plaguing modern persons: 'Eros is sick; man is uneasy, something is bothering him.'[9] In *L'avventura*, this cultural preoccupation with sex is caricatured, particularly when Sandro, in pursuing a newspaper columnist who has news of Anna, stumbles upon a media frenzy over a famous visiting prostitute, Gloria Perkins (with whom Sandro will sleep at the end of the movie). In fact, not only are reporters in a frenzy over her presence, but the entire male population of the town is practically in riot. Throughout the culture, sex is used as a form of escape, and therefore the pursuit of it has become extreme.

The scene in Sandro's villa nicely exemplifies Antonioni's use of mise-en-scene. The filmmaker has an eye for location settings, using found objects and architecture not merely as an adequate backdrop for narrative events but as a means of expressing the emotions and moods of the characters.[10] The confusion and apprehension that Anna feels are complicated emotions, which dialogue can only partially convey. Using the objects and architectural setting (doors, windows, beams) with the movements and positioning of the characters express these emotions with nuances difficult to reproduce verbally. Chatman describes these images as metonyms and not symbols. 'The appropriate rhetorical figure is not metaphor or symbol but metonymy, the figure of association or contiguity, which ... occupies the semantic pole opposite metaphor.'[11] Using portals to convey separation doesn't indirectly symbolize that idea, it directly expresses separation.

In Chapter 2 I noted that realism could either refer to the ability to capture the outer world, as Bazin was fond of, or the inner world, in the sense articulated by Münsterberg. Antonioni's attention to place, the physical situation in which the action occurs, aligns him with the tradition of Italian Neorealism. In fact, there are several long takes, where we have a good opportunity to absorb the mise-en-scene, a practice Bazin would have appreciated had he lived long enough to see the film. But the use of these settings to reveal the inner life of the characters also makes him a psychological realist. When certain scenes seem unrealistic from an external point of view, they usually serve to communicate the complicated thoughts and emotions within. For example, the frantic male mob that hounds prostitute Gloria Perkins seems unrealistic in one sense, but the scene conveys the very real preoccupation with sex predominate in contemporary culture, no less true today than in 1960. If realism refers to how we actually experience the world, which is the view I'm arguing for, then Antonioni's films are realistic in representing

both the physical outer world and the complicated inner world, often at the same time (which suggests how fluid the inner/outer ends of the spectrum are when we depict human experience). On the whole, however, Antonioni's emphasis on place and setting make him the sort of realist Bazin was fond of; and in this book Antonioni best exemplifies the emphasis on imagery and the outer world of space and things.

The use of the island as the setting in which Anna disappears best exemplifies these points, and does so regarding the issue most important to this discussion: meaninglessness. The island itself conveys that experience. First of all, it is an island, something that stands by itself. Patrizia (Esmeralda Ruspoli), the wealthy matron of the group, describes them: 'Islands... I don't get them... surrounded by nothing but water... poor things.'[12] But it's the look of the island that resonates so well with the meaninglessness expressed in the characters: barren, towering rocks, lifeless and menacing.

It is with this island that Antonioni is able to express the barrenness of most of the characters and their relationship. When Anna and Sandro get a moment alone, she attempts to discuss her misgivings about the relationship. He puts her off, explaining that they'll have time enough to discuss things when they are married. 'Believe me Anna, words are becoming less and less necessary, they create misunderstandings. I care for you, isn't that enough?' The discussion takes place amongst the rugged rocks. There isn't even any vegetation in this area. Antonioni positions them so that one usually has his or her back to the other, rarely meeting face to face, and at the end of the conversation, both have their backs to one another. (Antonioni uses this gesture often. Later, Sandro will propose to Claudia, and Claudia's uncertain reaction is conveyed through a similar positioning of the characters.) The conversation by itself reveals the emptiness of the relationship that lies just under the surface; placing that conversation against the barren rocks of the islands more forcefully makes the point (see Figure 4.1).

Another relationship in the party serves as a more extreme example of the sickness of Eros: that between Giulia (Dominique Blanchar) and Corrado (James Addams). Their relationship is overtly dysfunctional. Corrado finds every opportunity he can to belittle her, and Giulia is understandably hurt and resentful. At one point in the conversation between Sandro and Anna described above, Giulia and Corrado appear in the upper left of the frame, climbing over rocks some distance away. Their appearance is conspicuous given the conversation, Antonioni once again using mise-en-scene to convey subtle implications (*that* is where this relationship is heading). After Anna's disappearance, while

Figure 4.1 Sandro and Anna fail to communicate. (Cino Del Duca/Pce/Lyre/The Kobal Collection)

the party searches for her, the island is used metonymically to express the separation between Giulia and Corrado. Corrado is in the foreground, and we see, over his back, the island stretch out in front of him as he searches for Anna. As the camera pans to the left, following his vision, we encounter a figure in white. As Corrado realizes it is Giulia and not Anna, he turns his back before they can make eye contact. She had been hurrying toward him, but stops once she realizes he has turned from her. The ensuing deep space composition with the two characters separated by the scrub and rock of the island, her with an almost pleading gesture, him with his back to her, says all we need to know about the relationship.

The island does more than reveal the emptiness of the characters; it is the basis of their *situation*, in Sartre's sense, during this part of the film. It is the environment in which they attempt to give meaning to their actions. When Anna disappears, the island becomes ominous and threatening, because that is the way the party sees the world at this point. There is a shot right after they discover Anna missing where the members of the party climb into the interior of the island. The camera angle is low, and the rocks loom large as the characters climb between them and out of the frame. It is as if the island swallowed them. As they search, there is little continuity in the editing; we're not sure how the island is laid out or where the characters are in relation to

one another. There is an overall sense of being lost, and though Anna's disappearance is the immediate motive for that feeling, it also seems that the whole situation is just a more explicit rendering of the general circumstances of their lives. Anna was lost before she came to the island (though she was far more aware of that fact than the rest of the party seems to be aware of their own estrangement). Claudia and Sandro will meander through Sicily and their own complicated relationship once they leave. The island is therefore a lens which magnifies their situation: lost, empty, meaningless. Interestingly, Claudia is the one person who is able to take that physical situation and find delight in it. In one shot, the camera looks down at her, as she kicks and plays in the surf. We don't have to look carefully to know this is Claudia; the most spiritually healthy of the group, she does not take the yacht trip or the island for granted. Everyone else is bored or only mildly amused at what they discover. This is just as Sartre describes: the situation isn't set in stone (so to speak); one chooses to make of it what one will.

The fact that Claudia seems much less empty than the rest of the characters stems from her circumstances: she is really not part of the moneyed world to which the rest of the group belongs. She is only along as Anna's friend. As the film progresses, we see more of how these characters live and can understand the source of their meaninglessness: first, the wealthy leisure class (which includes all the major characters besides Claudia) is too preoccupied with status to be able to choose a more meaningful life; and second, modern culture in general is devoid of meaningful options from which one might choose alternate ways of living. It is difficult to choose a meaningful project if there are little resources offered from which to choose.

Turning first to the spiritual poverty of the leisure class, one immediately notices how bored they are. Nothing much interests them; it's just another cruise. Here, again, Claudia provides contrast, delighting even at newspapers blowing into the boat's wake, while the rest take everything for granted. It isn't simply that they are too used to these excursions; it's that they are too locked into their allotted roles through social expectations. Perhaps the most obvious example is Raimondo (Lelio Luttazzi), who comes as close as anyone can to providing comic relief in an Antonioni film. When the group stops for a swim, Raimondo gears up for skin diving, to Patrizia's surprise. When asked if he likes the activity, Raimondo replies, 'I simply loath it, yet I must conform, what can you do?' The remark is tongue in cheek, but telling nevertheless. On the island, the group discovers an ancient vase and passes it around. It slips from Raimondo's hands and shatters. He smugly observes, 'It

figures', and that's as much reaction as anyone has. The group has little interest in the world outside its exclusive borders, even if their own situation is meaningless.

A preoccupation with sex substitutes for more meaningful connections. Raimondo earnestly and unsuccessfully attempts to seduce a bored Patrizia, who treats him as the child he is. At Patrizia's estate, Giulia seduces a teenaged aristocrat, and demands that Claudia not keep the secret from Corrado. And of course Sandro must go from one woman to the next. Near the end of the movie, when the group is reassembling at a swank hotel, it seems all the guests are complicit in a game where each treats the others as sexual objects. As Sandro and Claudia make their way among the other patrons, the men make suggestive glances at Claudia, and the women do the same with Sandro (particularly when he is alone). The anodyne sex isn't simply a way to mask a strained relationship; it's a way to preoccupy oneself when there is nothing else worth doing. In that way, it's a sure sign that the characters commit themselves to no meaningful project. Conformity to class expectations, no matter how much they are despised (as with Raimondo's snorkeling), replaces the individuals' choice of a meaningful project. Sex is all that remains.

Turning now to the other general condition of meaningless described in the film – that of the spiritual poverty of the society overall – we find again that a preoccupation with sex is the primary symptom of the greater problem. I have already mentioned the male mob swarming after Gloria Perkins. There is another scene which suggests this phenomenon, a visually powerful scene of Claudia pinned by the male gaze. After their arrival in Noto, Claudia waits for Sandro as he checks a hotel in hopes of finding Anna. She rests against a staircase wall and soon realizes that the local men are leering at her. There is a cut to a long shot, with Claudia at the bottom of the stairwell wall; she is at the intersection of the lines in the wall and the angled direction of the men's gaze, who peer over the wall all along the ascending stairs. It's a carefully composed shot, the characters and architecture conspiring to make Claudia the object of their (and our) look. Uneasy, she wanders away from the wall, as more men crowd in to gawk. The camera tracks her, then tilts up past her head to become a point-of-view shot of men staring down at her from a rail on top of a wall; it is now a low angle shot conveying vulnerability. This is a good example of what Sartre indicates as 'the look': the way in which others can make us an object by focusing on our physical or factual being. Beauvoir would later remark on the plight of women in the twentieth century in similar terms; males

maintain an active subjectivity (the bearer of the gaze) while women are too often made an object, the *Other,* robbed of their subjectivity.[13] This is the social situation in which the women in this film find themselves: one where they are always vulnerable to the objectifying male gaze. Conversely, what does this say about the men, who are so eager to feast their eyes that they think nothing of the resulting intimidation?

The most effective way in which Antonioni reveals meaninglessness at the cultural level is through architecture. Buildings are human creations, reflecting our priorities, goals, and moods. Here Antonioni capitalizes on the antiquity of Italy to provide telling contrasts between old and new. Compare the romantic, theatrical baroque architecture from centuries past with the simple, ugly, efficiency-oriented buildings of today. One need not live in Italy to notice this difference. In the United States, for example, the proliferation of monotonous strip malls and homogeneity of style in suburban neighborhoods parallel the modern, minimalist architecture encouraged by Mussolini (not in terms of architectural style but of the poverty of its expressiveness).

The use of modern architecture to convey meaninglessness is best exhibited in probably the most famous scene of the movie. Thinking they are arriving at Noto, they stumble onto a deserted village. The style is modern throughout (fascist Italian architecture): unadorned buildings, square, mostly straight lines. The beginning of most shots frames only these buildings. The camera then pans slowly to the character action, and the shot ends with the characters again out of frame; though the buildings remain for us to ponder. These lifeless, deserted structures simultaneously express the anxieties of the characters (still hunting for Anna at this point) and the situation in which they must act. They begin their relationship in earnest after this scene, as if the emptiness of the village drives them, for comfort, into one another's arms. Is their relationship based on an authentic attraction, or a flight from meaninglessness? This scene suggests the latter.

The more meaningful architecture of the past contrasts to this modern style. In Noto, Sandro (himself an architect) describes his admiration of it to Claudia. She encourages him: 'I am convinced you could make really beautiful things.' Sandro replies, 'I don't know, I really don't know about that. Who needs beautiful things nowadays, Claudia? How long will they last? All of this was built to last centuries. Today, ten, twenty years at the most, and then? Well...' Sandro is giving us insight into the values of the modern world, which, unlike the buildings that surround him, are temporary and shallow. He is now too comfortable with money to deny the requests of well-paying customers. But the

conversation makes him conscious of how much he has lost in following wealth and status over creativity: later, in the midst of the grandiose architecture that almost mocks him, he comes across a young man sketching the ornate work that adorns a nearby building. He intentionally knocks over the inkwell, ruining the work. The two sources of meaninglessness converge at this point: Sandro feels trapped by the expectations of an upper-class lifestyle, but there are really no meaningful alternatives in the modern world to which he can turn.

In sum, *L'avventura*, as with Antonioni's other films, shows us not just the personalities that populate the modern world but the situation in which they live. Many of the characters lead meaningless lives and therefore cannot sustain meaningful relationships. The women fare better than the men. While Anna disappears, we might well conclude that her disappearance is not an escape from herself so much as an escape from the social situation that she finds intolerable. As Peter Brunette has observed, to disappear in a society that denies your autonomy may be the only gesture you have of real autonomy.[14] Claudia also seems to be in more possession of a sense of purpose than anybody else. She wants the relationship with Sandro to be based on real emotions and commitment; and she is genuinely troubled by her betrayal of Anna. Her actions may be questionable, but they seem to stem from someone who takes her actions seriously because they mean something to her. Not so for Sandro, or the other men in this movie, who are willing to take any opportunity for a new adventure, a diversion from a pervasive meaninglessness that they seem unable to acknowledge. Sandro's disclosure that he once wanted to create things, followed by the callous destruction of the student's artwork, suggests that at one level he knows and is embittered by the meaninglessness. But he also seems too distracted, too detached from himself to understand what he's doing. Claudia's caress at the end of the film suggests as much; her comforting gesture might be interpreted as pity rather than forgiveness. In the final shot, a long shot from behind the couple as she caresses him, the juxtaposition of the crumbling architecture spatially associated with him and the natural, mountainous vista associated with her provides the final statement about who these people really are (see Figure 4.2).

So if characters like Sandro lead meaningless lives largely because of a society that offers few resources for meaning, is it really their fault? This is what I find so interesting about Antonioni's films: they show us the relationship between self and world, suggesting that it is as much the culture to blame for meaninglessness as the often hapless individuals who inhabit

Figure 4.2 *L'avventura*'s protagonists are associated with the imagery that expresses their character. (Cino Del Duca/Pce/Lyre/The Kobal Collection)

it. Before working out the consequences this may have for Sartrean freedom, we'll examine similar themes in another Antonioni film.

L'eclisse

L'eclisse repeats many of the same themes as *L'avventura*: problematic relationships, the threat of meaninglessness, and the resistance of the world. However, in *L'avventura* it is a specific social world that created pressures for conformity and opportunities for escape; in *L'eclisse* it is a broader, less distinct sense of economic and technological forces that resists the ability of people to make meaningful choices. Moreover, the limitations on freedom seem far more pervasive in this film, to the point where it becomes questionable whether we can really assume the sort of freedom that Sartre describes at all.

L'eclisse opens with the closing rounds of a long break-up. Vittoria (Monica Vitti) has decided to leave fiancé Riccardo (Francisco Rabal). She walks home at dawn with Riccardo in tow as he futilely attempts to resuscitate the relationship. Later that day, she visits her mother (Lilla Brignone) at the stock exchange in Rome. Her mother is heavily invested in the market, and Vittoria finds little solace in the market's manic scramble. She does, however, meet Piero (Alain Delon), her mother's broker, with whom she will soon begin a relationship. Later

that evening, she and a neighbor, Anita (Rosanna Roy), visit the apartment of another neighbor, Marta (Mirella Ricciardi), who has grown up in Kenya. The three women lose themselves for a while in an imaginative escape to tribal Africa. The next day, Vittoria accompanies Anita and her husband as the latter delivers a private plane to a small airport in Verona, and she delights in the easy atmosphere of the place. Visiting her mother again at the stock exchange, this time on a day the market has crashed, Vittoria begins her relationship with Piero in earnest. He visits her apartment at night, and while he attempts to negotiate his way into her apartment from the street, a drunk steals his sports car and drives off. The next day the two meet a few blocks from Vittoria's apartment, where the car, corpse still inside, is hauled from a lake. They now begin their romance, eventually becoming passionately involved. One afternoon, after spending stolen time together in Piero's office, they agree they will meet every day, and that evening as well, in their accustomed location: the corner of a new building site close to Vittoria's apartment. The film then cuts to several minutes of various images of mundane activity at the corner. It becomes clear that the two will not meet, and in fact neither bothers to show up at all; instead we are treated to a collage of natural images mixed with foreboding views of the industrialized landscape.

Again, imagery is the main way in which Antonioni expresses both the salient forces of the world and the inner life of the characters; the plot by itself does little to convey the existentialist issues. An examination of the setting used to depict the background and situation of the main characters will show us who they are and the situation which shapes them.

Like the characters in *L'avventura*, the female is more authentic and in touch with her freedom. In fact, we are introduced to her as she is exercising that freedom in the breakup with Riccardo. Much can be said about the cinematic style of the opening scene, but we'll focus on the world in which these characters live. As dawn breaks and Vittoria opens the curtains (itself a gesture of her desire to escape the situation), we see a monstrous water tower that is part of the architecture of Rome's EUR section, which Mussolini had built for the World's Fair to reflect the modern, industrial goals of fascist Italy. This is also Vittoria's neighborhood, and we see more of it in her walk home. Like the abandoned village that Claudia and Sandro stumble into, the architecture here is drab, utilitarian, featureless. It is where Vittoria lives, and it is the situation (again in Sartre's sense) through which we must understand her. To begin with, there is the same sense of emptiness conveyed through

architecture that we discussed in connection with *L'avventura*. This is a world which offers no clear direction or purpose. As she explains to her friend who has lived in Africa, 'But here everything's so difficult.'[15] Yet it is also a world which does not impose a particular character upon its inhabitants, and while Vittoria may feel somewhat lost at times, she is capable of making her own choices about meaningful matters, like who she will have a relationship with.

She is happiest when she can enjoy simplicity or natural beauty. In fact, the image of rustling leaves is heavily associated with her, as most commentators like to point out. At various points in the movie, tree canopies stirred by the wind seem to surround her. In some places, the shot is just of the leaves, and it's not even clear that they are the objects of her look. Antonioni is using them to express her state of mind (or, as critic William Arrowsmith refers to it, 'the leave life of her interior world'[16]). My own reading of this is that the leaves, and the wind stirring them, convey a sense of freedom, both from the difficulties of the techno-economic world and from the difficulties and challenges of her personal life. Whenever there are points in which she is in touch with her freedom, the use of leaves or other things stirred by a breeze suggests that she understands her ability to accept or deny events. For example, her hair is blown by the fan as she realizes she will really leave Riccardo, and leaves blow wildly at the beginning and end of her relationship with Piero. In a scene where she is searching the neighborhood for Marta's dog, her facial expressions reveal joy in the blowing wires on empty flagpoles and the vertical lines that stand out against the dark night sky. Like the rustling of the leaves, the blowing wires convey a sense of freedom and peace.

In general, her ability to enjoy a break from routine reveals her consciousness of how things might be different and ability to appreciate alternatives. At the end of the long day marked by her break-up with Riccardo, during the visit to Marta's apartment, she loses herself in the art and souvenirs from Africa to the point that she paints her skin dark, dons an African costume, and dances about the apartment to a recording of tribal drums. Similarly, when she and Anita accompany Anita's husband on a private airplane to a small airport in Verona, the flight, the clouds, and the simplicity of the airport are all a delight to her. 'Everything's so nice here', she says of the airport. Really, the only thing notable about the airport is the casual pace and easy-going conversations of the people around her. She does, however, return to the world of the stock-exchange and the EUR. Her escapes are not a flight from herself, the way they are for Sandro; they are simply her way of

balancing the pressures and complexities in life. Her ability to acknowledge that she still has to live in the stressful world of productivity and complicated relationships indicates that she is attempting to navigate life conscious of both its pitfalls and her ability to recover from them and find alternatives. Her life is reasonably balanced, as Arrowsmith has observed: 'She withdraws and advances as need requires but constantly, even when teetering, recovers her balance.'[17]

To understand the importance of the imagery of the EUR as indicative of her situation, let's examine the sequence of shots that establish the beginning of her relationship with Piero. She meets him at the scene of the accident where they pull his car from the water, and the two, in a playful mood, stroll through a wooded area. They come to a café, linger a moment, and continue on. The café is rather plain, and one shot places it, and them, in this neighborhood: the plain, square building occupies the left of the frame, umbrellas with the Coca-Cola logo are in the fore, and a scrub-covered hillside rises to the right, topped by a series of curved metallic street lamps. (The lamps are a visual motif: grey, utilitarian structures which epitomize the modern landscape. The film ends on a close-up of one of them.) In typical Antonioni fashion, the camera lingers briefly even after the characters walk off screen. Why include shots like these? They do not seem to serve the plot, and in fact they seem to get in the way of the action. But this is only an objection if you think the only purpose of films is to relate causal events as in a typical narrative, and as we're already well aware, Antonioni is after much more than that in these films. Such scenes *do* slow down the pace of the film, giving us time to consider the visuals and ponder the more subtle motives of the characters. While Antonioni can frame even mundane landscapes to bring out their beauty (and does so here), it is the drabness of the café and hillside which conveys the cultural meaninglessness of the modern world.

The camera reverses to a long shot of the two as they continue through Vittoria's extended neighborhood. We see lines of apartment buildings, again modern and drab, rising behind and around them. As they cross a street to what will become 'their' corner, the place that they will regularly meet, he promises to kiss her when they reach the other side. There is heavy use of rustling leaves here, sometimes behind the characters, and in one shot only the leaves fill the frame. The hesitant Vittoria is fully aware of her freedom at this point. Despite the trees, however, this corner conveys the raw, industrial reality of their physical and cultural space: it is a construction site for a large building.

When they meet here later, after she has decided to pursue the relationship, this mundane place becomes ominous. Here the mood is set

by a low angle shot in which only the back of her head appears against a grey skyline. Her head is framed by one of the curved street lamps on one side and a tower of latticed metal on the other. The music is minimal and threatening. Cut to a long shot placing her at the base of the half-completed building: an ugly, imposing structure, with poles sticking out from all sides. A classical Hollywood movie would have lovers meet in a café or park, but Antonioni chooses this to be their usual meeting place. It is also the place where they *fail* to meet at the end of the movie. Chatman's explains its significance.

> Why this anonymous street corner in EUR? The drab intersection is not mere scenery. It is the sign of a general predicament. It is not only a place where a representative couple fail to meet but a culprit for that failure. It exemplifies, both as instance and as reason, the general incapacity of the modern city to facilitate meeting.[18]

Of course, there is far more to Rome than EUR, and Antonioni makes use of other settings to express the movie's themes, particularly in connection with Piero. We first get to know him through the stock market. The two scenes in that place are unusually long, again contributing to the relatively slow pace of the film. But it is relevant to our understanding of the modern world as the situation in which these characters act. Piero is one of many caught up in frantic phone calls and quick deals. There is a certain frenzied madness in the atmosphere, which Antonioni captures through the images of the action on and around the trading floor as well as in the pace of the editing. We are not informed of the particular goals or functions of these people, and the overall effect on the viewer is one of confusion. Is Antonioni showing us that the pursuit of money in our society is similarly mad? Certainly this much is true: in a world empty of meaningful options, the pursuit of money can fill a void every bit as much as the pursuit of sex.

Piero is an extension of the economic machinery that he serves, and he relishes that role. He is at home in the stock market and the offices at the brokerage; he knows his place in the business hierarchy and treats those above and below him with the respect or contempt due their position. He is capable of being brutal and callous when necessary (e.g., when he shouts at debtors on the phone after a market crash). When the drunk steals his car and drives it into the lake, his only concern is with the economic setback of the event, not the fact that a man has lost his life in the incident. Unlike Sandro, who seemed to be anxious about the fact that he forfeited a creative approach to

his career for an economically lucrative one, Piero does not seem to have any fear of how the actions in his life add up. There is no sense of despair at not having done something more substantive or creative, no need to escape a nagging sense that his life is empty because he has lost touch with higher goals. As Chatman observes, 'he has lost (or never possessed) his soul'.[19] His project, in the Sartrean sense of that word, is one entirely determined by a social edifice, and he accepts it without question. This success-driven attitude carries over even to his romantic pursuit of Vittoria; his advances are always aggressive and results-oriented. She is a prize to be won, much like winning an account with a big investor.

At the beginning of the romance, the two decide to go to Piero's house. But he doesn't take her to his apartment; rather, he takes her to his family home. This gives us the opportunity to see the world he has come from, and it's a decidedly different set of images than those associated with Vittoria. The place is in an older part of Rome, and it has more grandeur than what we have seen with Vittoria's apartment and in the home in which she grew up (which we see in an earlier scene). But it is dark and cheerless. By contrast, she, in her white dress, seems misplaced. Wandering through the rooms, she looks through shutters to the outside, her back to the camera so we cannot read her face, but the movement toward the window again suggests trepidation at the start of the relationship. A brief reverse shot from outside the window frames her in the fore and Piero in shadow, looking on, as the force from which she seeks to flee. By placing her and moving her about the house like this we get a sense that she knows quite well what she is getting herself into and is deciding her fate. *She* sees the difference between them. At another point she looks out through another window, and we watch with her from behind her shoulder at the old, ornate architecture of the neighborhood, so different from EUR. A point-of-view shot focuses on a nearby café, in one sense much nicer than the homely but quaint one we saw earlier in her neighborhood, but the white tablecloths are nearly empty of customers. Piero comes from a world of money and privilege, but it is a dehumanizing one that seems to have shaped him into a mere instrument for economic production.

Once they do enter into the relationship, there are always barriers, conveyed both through images and dialogue. When he begins his flirtation from the street outside her apartment, iron fences and rails suggest their separation (see Figure 4.3). Their first passionate kiss takes place with a window pane separating their lips. In one scene, we find them on a hill overlooking another featureless EUR building. Piero declares, 'I

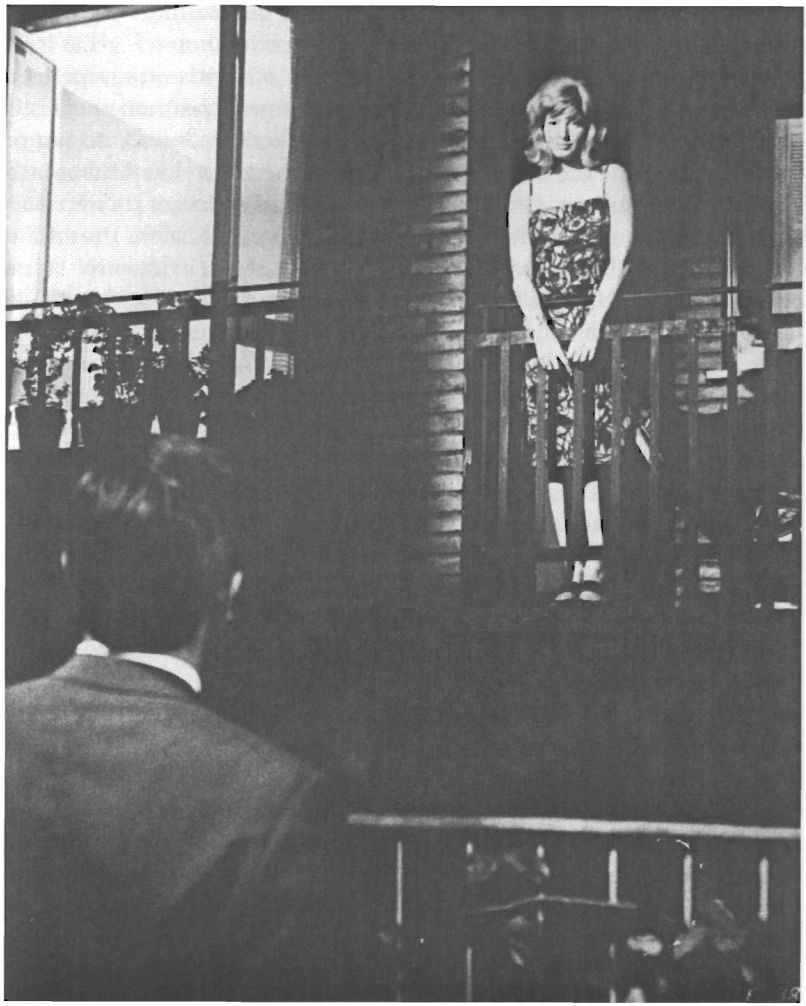

Figure 4.3 The separation of Piero and Vittoria is conveyed by spatial and physical barriers. (Interopa-Cineriz-Paris/Times/The Kobal Collection)

feel like I'm in a foreign country.' Vittoria responds, 'Funny. That's how I feel around you.' The overall feeling of the relationship is that they are attracted to one another, and both seem to genuinely want the relationship, but they are also incapable of connecting at a deep level. They come from different worlds, but the real problem is that participation in

this culture yields no resources from which to build a meaningful relationship. There's little connection to be made at a human level.

While viewers often find the end a bit of a surprise (they promise to meet but neither shows up at their traditional spot), on successive viewings the end of the relationship is clearly foreshadowed, at least on my reading of the film. Certainly the sense of estrangement that marks the relationship throughout the film is one indication of its necessary demise, but the penultimate scene, the last moments before the ending montage, gives hints that each is rethinking the relationship. When together, they relish each other's presence, and they eagerly plan to meet every day, and that night as well. Right after they part, however, each seems a bit sad. Is that because they cannot stand to be apart, or because they are realizing the futility of their passion? The camera follows each in turn, she leaving his building, he putting his office back in order. Both pause and look reflective. Why does the camera linger at these pauses just now? Why would they need to be so concerned after having just reassured each other so completely? And then we see the leaves again, Vittoria walking under them, and the rustling is quite audible, making their presence felt even when they're not visible. My take on this scene is that they are being honest with themselves about the future of the relationship. In Vittoria's case, her sense of freedom allows her to leave it before she finds herself repeating the long and ultimately painful scenario like the one she just ended with Riccardo. The fact that they do not meet later that same day is therefore not terribly surprising, though, again, as with all of Antonioni's movies, it takes multiple viewings to appreciate the significance of what seems, at first, insignificant. In support of this interpretation, note that Antonioni writes that he should have put the following verses of Dylan Thomas at the start of the film: '... some certainty must as well exist, /if not to love well, at least not to love.'[20]

The closing montage of the film is subject to a variety of interpretations. Clearly, the montage does more than merely inform us that the lovers have failed to meet. The constant juxtaposition of images leads us beyond the plot altogether: buildings, shadows, angles, patterns, light, leaves, ants, water, and all variety of angles and distances from the corner at which the film's protagonists are conspicuously absent. The very lack of the people that we seek makes us reflect on these objects and images and what they might mean. This is the world that has made these people, with competing forms of industrialization and nature, the threat of nuclear war (announced in a newspaper headline) and the domestic routines of people. Nothing quite specific comes from this,

but there is an overall sense of tension and anxiety. An establishing shot of the corner makes us expect the lovers will meet, and Antonioni uses this expectation to create a tension which becomes unfixed from the characters and seeps into the world itself. We see someone who might be Vittoria or Piero, but no, they're not here yet. The people we do see look about, tense, expectedly. Time seems to be running out: water drains from a barrel, it gets darker. There is an anxiety we are left with even after we become aware that we will not see the two lovers at all. We realize the film is about the world we live in as much as it is about the specific narrative we have been witnessing. Brunette explains this effectively, and in terms that will point us back to the existential analysis.

> Things refuse to represent or to point to an elsewhere, to a something, or a meaning, beyond themselves. This now apparently humanless terrain also attests to the power of the sheer facticity of objects in the world... a truth that reminds one of the phenomenological insistence that Being is always being *in the world.*[21]

Rethinking radical freedom

Antonioni's films provide both support and critique for Sartre's views of freedom and our responsibility for choosing a meaningful life. To begin with, it is easy enough to find examples of characters denying or embracing their responsibility, and these examples show how effective Sartre's concepts are in understanding these typical human behaviors. Sandro, for example, is escaping and running from his anguish by plunging himself into one sexual adventure after another. He is occasionally aware of his possibilities, as when he refers to the ideals he had in younger days, but at some level he also knows that he is unwilling to give up the life of money and leisure that he has become accustomed to. He does not wish to acknowledge that fact about his life, it seems, but his willingness to ruin the artist's work and his coldness to Claudia suggests that at some level he is aware of who he is and feels inadequate. He is in bad faith; and he hides his despair over the failure to accomplish his youthful goals by distracting himself. On the opposite extreme, Vittoria seems most in touch with her freedom and the ability to make meaningful choices. Her decision to leave both relationships, even if it leaves us with a sense of loss and failure over the possibility of finding any meaningful relationship, at least assures us she will not

simply play along with her partners' expectations. We cannot be sure what she will do, or who she will choose to be, but it seems clear that she will be able to more consciously choose her project than Piero and Sandro are capable of choosing theirs.

The impact on the world in shaping these characters points to a more critical reception of Sartre's philosophy. Antonioni's ability to bring the world so forcefully into his films helps us understand this point. For Sartre, while the world offers us possibilities, we are always free to choose among them, or choose to deny them altogether (suicide, he explains, is always an option when no other course is viable); the world does not limit our freedom, just our options. For example, Anna's disappearance might be thought of as a choice not to play the game expected of her. The world she lives in does not offer her acceptable alternatives, so she opts out of it altogether. Yet some characters do not seem to be *capable* of understanding or choosing among different options, and it might not be appropriate to say that they are free at all, at least not in Sartre's sense of an absolute freedom. Sandro, for example, seems rather lost. One gets the impression that his flight from himself results as much from an inability to comprehend his options as from the choice to deny the circumstances of his life. He seems emotionally stunted, which explains his inability to be loyal and his constant need for sexual escapades. The male preoccupation with sex throughout *L'avventura*, in fact, suggests that this may be a cultural phenomenon; the men are woefully unable to make an honest and meaningful connection in a relationship. It begins to seem, however, that these shortcomings are not so much a result of bad or neglected choices on the part of individuals, but a culturally influenced lack of ability to comprehend and identify different possible projects, particularly those dealing with relationships and, to a lesser extent, career. That is, we might read Antonioni's movies as a statement on how the social world impedes freedom in some way.

Piero best exemplifies this. While he seems to relish the role he plays in society, there is little about him that suggests he understands how contingent that role is. Unlike Sandro's admission that he once had dreams, Piero seems oblivious to the possibility of living any other way. Antonioni has said in interview that he had originally hoped to make two versions, one from Vittoria's perspective and a separate one from Piero's, so that he could better explore the effects of money. 'Whoever lives within the Stock Exchange sees life through banknotes. The consequence of this is that even real feelings can be filtered through the cobweb money creates around the mind of whoever is involved in it and doesn't see anything else all day long.'[22] Piero's relationship with

Vittoria, instead of opening up opportunities for different ways of thinking or living, just seems alien to him, as he indicates when he states, 'I feel like I'm in a foreign country.' This is not surprising; the force of the economic machinery so powerfully depicted in the film is bound to produce personalities like Piero; and anyone living under conditions of capitalism in the Western world will find Piero a familiar character. The pace, the inducement of money, the inability to acknowledge the relevance of competing ways of life are all factors that shape and limit someone like Piero. He is, in short, unable to seriously consider alternate options regarding his life. But if we are unable to effectively consider options, than we are effectively not free. This suggests a problem with Sartre's notion of freedom. Sartre can only say that Piero chooses the meaning of the events imposed by society. But persons like Piero, who are common enough today, never seem self-conscious of their ability to choose, and that suggests that the sort of freedom that Sartre explains is just inaccurate.

While Antonioni's films are works of fiction, our own experiences might confirm there is a problem with Sartre's absolute freedom. This is far from an original criticism; commentators have long faulted the views of the early Sartre for this.[23] Sartre himself would come to retreat from a freedom that makes the meaning of objects completely dependent on choice. In his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, a work that focuses more on social analysis than on the first-person description of consciousness we find in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre describes how scarcity is a fundamental element of the world which imposes limitations on our freedom. The objects that we deal with are described as the field of the 'practico-intert', in which objects are able to dynamically exert influence on us even while we attempt to define them.[24] But this work drifts away from the lived perspective of the individual that I have established as an essential feature of existentialism.

If we wish to keep rooted in the sort of descriptions that characterize *Being and Nothingness*, I suggest we consider the view of freedom that Beauvoir describes in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Beauvoir, as described in Chapter 1, has a view in many ways similar to Sartre's and based largely on his view of freedom, though for her the nature of freedom lies in the ability to simply disclose the world, and specifically, to disclose meaningful identify for one's self. But she views freedom as subject to development, and her description of the passage from childhood to the subjectivity of adulthood provides at least a sketch of how freedom is something we arrive at in life and not something we have inherently as a result of being conscious. Beauvoir also acknowledges that freedom

is vulnerable to the effects of society, and thus she can account for the fact that the social world is capable of curtailing our freedom in a way that the early Sartre cannot. Women, for example, are often denied the conditions necessary to develop their subjectivity fully. 'Ignorance and error are facts as inescapable as prison walls.'[25] Still, many social theorists will want a more complete account of just what constitutes freedom and what sorts of social resources are required in order to bring it about. This lies far outside the scope of this project.

As I have argued elsewhere, we should consider the sort of freedom that the fully mature person experiences as the *ideal* to which people should strive for if they wish to find meaning in an ambiguous world.[26] That is, we should think of the sort of freedom that Beauvoir and Sartre describe not as inseparable from consciousness but as a vulnerable capacity that needs to be developed, yet one that is very achievable if the social context is conducive to that development.

Antonioni's films suggest the plausibility of a developmental conception of freedom. Vittoria seems to have achieved something close to a fully developed freedom, and it allows her to disclose a meaningful appreciation of natural beauty or the pleasant, easy-going pace of a small airport. It also allows her the ability to know that she can choose to end a relationship that ceases to be meaningful. Piero, on the other hand, seems far less capable of recognizing that he has options. The project of his career and the role he plays in the economic machinery has either crippled or prevented the development of the ability to reveal different, viable options. Sandro's level of freedom is between these; while he does seem to understand that there are other possible meanings and identities he might be pursuing, they still do not appear to him as viable. He therefore escapes the emptiness of his chosen path via whatever sexual adventure is at hand rather than seriously confronting social boundaries (as Anna does, albeit by physical flight). Is he in bad faith, denying his freedom? That depends on how free he is to begin with; one has to be free in order to be bothered by its implications. Surely, to some degree Sandro is escaping his responsibilities and so is in bad faith, but persons that truly cannot attain perspectives revealing different possibilities are not in bad faith.

Conclusion

In Part I, I argued that film provides ways of reflecting on the human condition, and that it can do so in ways that carry advantages over a philosophical essay. Antonioni's films clearly show the way in which

visual artistry communicates issues in different ways than essays do. The use of imagery is obviously the key factor here, and this is true of Antonioni's films more than it is of most other filmmakers. The effect is to appeal directly to our ability to make associations based on our experience of the world; and the sorts of associations we make are not unique to mid-twentieth century Italy. The effects of social class, the power of capitalism, the invasiveness of technology and industry, and the politics of sex all play as influential a role in understanding the human condition today as they did several decades ago, and they will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. While this use of imagery does not articulate particular points and arguments, and in fact requires substantial feats of interpretation on our part, it is nevertheless a powerful means of generating insights into these issues.

Antonioni's works also exemplify the point I made in Chapter 3 regarding realism in film. In some ways, the stylistic embellishments of these films are wholly unrealistic. By his own admission, his films depart from the Italian Neorealism of Rossolini or De Sica, in that his goal is to convey the inner life of the characters more than it is to report objectively on their lives and environment. 'That's why I began to make films that the French critics described as "interior neorealism." The aim was to put the camera inside the characters – not outside.'[27] And yet, he accomplishes this 'interior neorealism' by attention to architecture, objects, and relational space, expressing our experience through the world that constitutes the object of our attentions. As I argued in Part I, this is precisely the sort of realism that we want if we are to investigate existentialism. The images, the editing, and the dialogue all reproduce the contextualized life of the characters, and it all works so well because Antonioni is able to relate to familiar objects and experiences. When we see the sleek, utilitarian designs of modern architecture contrasted with the flourishes and opulence of centuries past, for example, it evokes a sense of meaninglessness that too often results from modern ways of living.

As a final observation on these films, I would like to point out how well they recreate the way we meaningfully engage the world at both the level of a third person, theoretical description and the personal level. The focus of this chapter has been on the former, that is, to explain how well we can use the insights of these films to understand and expand (and in fact, to critique) the points made by Sartre, but the films also challenge the viewers to engage their minds creatively, thereby motivating the sort of change in perspective and challenge to everydayness that lies at the heart of meaningful choices. They do this in many ways,

but the most obvious is that the narratives are unconventional, with unusual or missing causal connections between events. In fact, there is very little of conventional plot here. As Chatman explains, 'The audience could well protest that there is no action. It would be more accurate to say that the film requires the audience to reconstruct the states of mind that prompted what action there is.'[28] The point of the movie is really about the characters themselves and the world they live in, and not so much about what they do in the story overall. But viewers are forced to work for the conclusions they arrive at. They must constantly make interpretations in order to make sense of scenes, images, and the actions of the characters. We're never sure if we're right, or if there is a right way to interpret the films at all; and it's this nature of the work that makes us question not just the meaning of a particular movie, but of the world (our world) conveyed by it. Other films discussed in this book also purposely defy our expectations and maintain open narratives to this effect. David Bordwell, in fact, argues that the entire genre of 'art films', as disparate as the individual films are, have this feature in common.

> Furthermore, the pensive ending acknowledges the author as a peculiarly humble intelligence; s/he knows that life is more complex than art can ever be, and the only way to respect this complexity is to leave causes dangling, questions unanswered. With the open and arbitrary ending, the art film reasserts that ambiguity is the dominant principle of intelligibility, that we are to watch less for the tale than the telling, that life lacks the neatness of art and *this art knows it*.[29]

But in addition to the fact that this art knows how ambiguous the world is, it puts us in a position to challenge conventional meanings and understandings that we usually don't think twice about. This is the real value of these films: they are a means of reflecting on life itself, not simply a philosopher's theory of it.

5
Religiosity in the Films of Ingmar Bergman

We have been examining some particular ways in which the modern world challenges our ability to find meaning. Antonioni's films suggest that a culture shaped by money and industry has left little resources with which individuals can build a meaningful life. Similar observations can be found throughout the arts, philosophy, and behavioral science; and these cultural conditions are precisely what make existentialism so compelling to contemporary thinking persons. These are also conditions that have ramifications beyond the ability of persons to engage one another, of course. Religion and morality are two areas directly impacted; and since these are typically sources of meaning in themselves, it's not surprising that this impact exacerbates the problem with meaninglessness. Both topics get considerable attention from existentialist philosophers, but the deep effect that they have on individuals at the personal level means there is concern across many disciplines, filmmaking not least. In this chapter we will focus on religiosity, and in the next, morality.

In general, the challenge to traditional religious beliefs comes from two modern developments. One consists of the change in priorities that we have seen in the Western world since the industrial revolution and rise of capitalism: the emphasis on money and status has displaced traditional concerns, robbing them of their cultural significance. The other has to do with the success of science in explaining the world, particularly Darwinism. The rational foundation for religious accounts has been undermined, particularly when religious writings are taken literally. In the twentieth century, this last point has been magnified by horrors like the Holocaust or the Spanish Civil War. Religious existentialists attempt to find a place for a religious attitude that honestly acknowledges these developments while making religion pertinent to

the concretely existing individual. Many, like Kierkegaard, identify the essential feature of religious experience in terms of a subjective state. Instead of appealing to supernatural forces or the fact of God's existence, they typically turn the focus of religious experience to the individual's way of viewing the world. Even though religious existentialists also seek to ground our particular being in something beyond us, which usually entails some conception of God, there is little agreement among these philosophers about what that means and how necessary is the belief in God. In fact, one might argue, as Tillich certainly does, that religiosity has more to do with the inner attitude toward life than with any particular belief system. At minimum, this provides another way to focus questions about the meaning of life; and for some, religiosity might even offer a solution to the problem of meaninglessness. However, the challenge of being religious in the contemporary world, the world where science has so thoroughly shaped our understanding of things, is to be religious authentically. That means adopting a religious attitude that is not a form of bad faith or an attempt to flee anxiety by retreating behind a set of beliefs that you find more comfortable than true.

In this chapter, I will explore these issues through some of the works of Swedish filmmaker Ingmar Bergman, with a particular emphasis on the film *Winter Light*. I think that Bergman's films are particularly good examples of the sort of religious quandaries described by the existentialists. Specifically, they capture some of the same insights that Tillich articulates in his theology, and we'll again see how the films might both corroborate and extend the existentialists' views.

Bergman's religious trilogy

Three films have come to be known as Bergman's 'religious trilogy': *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961), *Winter Light* (1962), and *The Silence* (1963). Bergman himself is responsible for this characterization. In 1963, the scripts of the three films were released together, and he introduced the set with this description: 'The theme of these three films is a "reduction" – in the metaphysical sense of that word. THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY – certainty achieved. WINTER LIGHT – certainty unmasked. THE SILENCE – God's silence – the negative impression.'[1] In many ways, this description makes sense. The concept of God and the role it plays in the lives of the characters certainly changes in the course of these three movies, from God as a point of hope and meaning in *Through a Glass Darkly* to an emphasis on God's silence in *Winter Light* to the lack of God altogether in *The Silence*.

But there are many other issues and themes moving through these movies as well. All of them offer fascinating portrayals of human relationships, regardless of any religious overtones. *Through a Glass Darkly* is a haunting portrayal of mental illness and its effect on the family. *The Silence* can be read as a statement about death, aging, and isolation. These films, then, are more than investigations into religion, and their classification as such may be misleading. Almost 30 years after Bergman had classified the films as a religious trilogy, he viewed the characterization as a rationalization. 'Today I feel that the "trilogy" has neither rhyme nor reason. It was a *Schnaps-Idee*, as the Bavarians say, meaning that it's an idea found at the bottom of a glass of alcohol, not always holding up when examined in the sober light of day.'[2]

And yet, I think that at least two of these films, *Through a Glass Darkly* and *Winter Light*, do provide a profound and insightful view of the religious attitude, and there is plenty of connection and development in the movies' themes. Previous Bergman movies are clearly part of this development as well, most notably *The Seventh Seal* and *Virgin Spring*. The former, in fact, is probably the most commonly discussed Bergman film on the issue of religion. It follows a knight returning from the Crusades in plague-ridden Europe. When Death, personified, comes to claim him, the knight challenges him to a game of chess, which is played out intermittently throughout the film. While he must inevitably lose the game, it buys him time to find some meaning to the horror he has observed during his life and attempt to understand the place of God in such a world. The film asks more questions than it answers, though it asks very good questions. Still, the sorts of movies Bergman began making beginning with *Through a Glass Darkly* are more conducive to the project of this book. His style changed away from the grandiose sets and stories of movies like *The Seventh Seal* to what he describes as 'chamber pieces'. Similar to chamber music, the movies of the trilogy and after are structured like chamber music, with three movements, a small number of characters, few and simple sets, and a composition that is profound despite (or perhaps due to) the sparseness of the components.

Like Antonioni, understanding Bergman's visual style is crucial for reading the film, but naturally there are significant differences between the two. Antonioni uses settings that he finds in various locations to express the inner life of the characters. Often the dialogue reveals little, and while facial expressions are sometimes important, we just as often have to read the characters' reactions through settings or the careful juxtaposition of images through editing. Bergman also knows how to make use of imagery in the setting, but his films focus more on the

actors, capturing subtleties that bring out the passions of the characters. Certainly smart dialogue is largely responsible for revealing their inner life, but Bergman sustains close-ups to powerful effect. Director of Photography Sven Nykvist, with whom Bergman regularly collaborated, employs just the right touch in the use of lighting to add to the emotional nuance. To grossly over generalize, we might say that Antonioni uses the things in the world, often through sweeping exteriors, to show us the human condition, while Bergman (beginning in the early 1960s) forces us into enclosed spaces where we are literally face to face with the characters and their inner turmoil. Bergman, therefore, exemplifies the sort of realism that I have identified in connection with Münsterberg's analysis: one that captures the emotional, psychological, inner world of human experience. Bergman's intensely personal style probably resonates with casual viewers more than the subtleties of Antonioni's use of imagery; and in terms of its ability to relate the human condition, it will likely seem more realistic. As Bergman explains: 'In this tone and style, one can't create a neorealist report. We're reflecting reality, and that reflection is meant to be so bewilderingly similar to reality that we lose any sense that it's actually a reflection.'[3]

Before discussing specific examples of this cinematic style in *Winter Light*, it will be helpful to understand the development of that movie's religious concepts if we first briefly consider *Through a Glass Darkly*. The movie follows the development of mental illness in a young woman, Karin (Harriet Andersson), and its effects on her brother, Minus (Lars Passgård), her husband, Martin (Max von Sydow), and father, David (Gunnar Björnstrand). Karin had been previously hospitalized for mental illness, and though the film begins with a happy reunion at the family's island home, it quickly becomes clear that not all is well. As the film progresses, she slips further and further into a delusional world, which she finds increasingly difficult to resist.

In the scene that marks the acceleration of her instability, she hides in the hull of a wrecked schooner. David and Martin are away, and a distraught Minus finds her. Transformed by her illness, she makes a sexual advance on her teenaged, sexually anxious brother, which emotionally traumatizes them both. The two older men return, and her father, who has purposely distanced himself from the family so as not to deal with the reality of his daughter's illness, finally confronts that reality. Karin explains her losing battle: 'I can't live in two worlds. I have to choose. I can't keep going back and forth between one and the other.'[4] The voices compel her to do things she is ashamed of, she admits. But the voices also herald the appearance of God: 'and then the

room with the people waiting. Those good, bright-faced people waiting for the door to open for God to come to them. Then the voices start and I have to do as they say.' This is a rare moment of honesty between father and daughter. David explains his troubled relationship with the family: fear of Karin's illness has made him absorbed with his work, but now he realizes the importance of those neglected relationships. (In the screenplay, Bergman describes this scene as follows: 'He puts out his hand to Karin, and she grips it. Both are absorbed in a deep feeling of unconditionally belonging together.'[5])

But the god that finally appears in her delusion will not be a warm and welcoming god. After the incident in the wreck, the family prepares to take Karin to the hospital. Again she disappears, this time to the dilapidated nursery upstairs. Martin and David find her, but she is already lost in her delusions. Peering at a tear in the wallpaper, as she has done previously in the film, she awaits the coming of God on bended knees. The arrival of the helicopter to take her off the island and the ominous shadows it casts accompanies the crescendo of the schizophrenic experience, which ends with her writhing and screaming. Martin, a physician, sedates her, and as she calms, she describes her experience.

> The door opened. But the god that came out was a spider. He came towards me and I saw his face. It was a terrible, stony face. He crawled up and tried to force himself into me, but I defended myself. The whole time I saw his eyes. They were cold and calm. When he couldn't penetrate me, he continued up my chest up onto my face and up on the wall. I have seen God.

This is one image of God, but the film ends with another. After Karin and Martin are flown off the island, Minus seeks comfort from David. His first-hand experience of his sister's illness in the shipwreck has awakened him to the cruel possibilities of the world. He is confronted with the same threat of meaninglessness that his father is coming to grips with. David comforts Minus with his belief that God is love.

Minus: Reality burst open and I tumbled out... Anything can happen... I can't live in this new world.
David: Yes, you can, but you must have something to hold on to.
Minus: What would that be? A god? Give me some proof of God. You can't.

David: Yes, I can. But you have to listen carefully... I can only give you a hint of my own hope. It's knowing that love exists for real in the human world.

Minus: A special kind of love, I suppose?

David: All kinds, Minus. The highest and the lowest, the most absurd and the most sublime. All kinds of love.

Minus: The longing for love?

David: Longing and denial. Trust and distrust.

Minus: So love is the proof?

David: I don't know if love is proof of God's existence, or if love is God himself.

Minus: For you, love and God are the same.

David: That thought helps me in my emptiness and my dirty despair.

Minus: Tell me more, Papa.

David: Suddenly the emptiness turns into abundance, and despair into life. It's like a reprieve, Minus, from a death sentence.

Through a Glass Darkly, then, explores two concepts of God. The idea of God as a personal, loving supernatural being rings false with the characters of this film. In the mid-twentieth century, with its atrocities and Cold War anxieties, the existence of God as traditionally conceived seemed unlikely to many people honestly struggling with their faith. What sort of God could allow for these things? What sort of God could allow Karin and her family to suffer the devastations of mental illness? Answer: a grotesque spider-god. This is clearly an absurd notion of what God is, and one that will deepen rather than fill the emptiness that haunts the movie's characters. If we are to make sense of God, then, that concept must evolve along with our understanding of the world. David's concept of God as love is an attempt to do that.

This notion that God is love is explored further, and to different conclusions, in *Winter Light*. The movie begins with a Lutheran pastor administering a Sunday service, and the scene deserves some detailed description as a demonstration of Bergman's style and its effectiveness in showing how the characters experience their religion. We start with a medium shot of the pastor, Tomas (Gunnar Björnstrand), delivering the sermon in a distinctly uninspired voice. The camera pulls back for a long shot, showing half a dozen parishioners in attendance, followed by a shot of the church from the outside and a voice-over of Tomas reciting the Lord's Prayer. The overcast sky is the same color as the snow-covered lawn, the leafless tree branches and stone church equally dark

against the white background; the contrasts emphasize the barrenness and severity of the scene. Here Bergman uses the setting as Antonioni would: the winter landscape outside matches the lifeless tone of the service on the inside. There's a fade back to Tomas as we're taken back into the church, now for a closer look at the parishioners and religious icons. Nearly each person gets a close-up, and the emotions range from boredom to brooding, but most seem emotionally charged with some personal issue clearly unrelated to the service. Bergman uses no ellipses here to shorten the service; we watch them approach the rail for communion and return to their seats, with plenty of opportunity to contemplate how everyone seems to be merely going through the motions. Interspersed with shots of Tomas are cuts to the various religious icons and the communion wafers, with close-ups of the face of the crucified Christ and the hand nailed to the cross. The religious symbols seem as cold and removed as the other elements of the sermon. This scene sets the tone for the film, but it also comments on the role of religion for these people. The close-ups suggest that these people have real concerns, but the religious rituals they dutifully follow have no meaning for them.

Afterwards, Tomas begins preparations for an afternoon service at another church. Enter Jonas Persson (Max von Sydow) and his wife, two of the attendees at the service, who are seeking counseling. Actually, it is Jonas who needs help; he has read that the Chinese have developed the atomic bomb and that they have been brought up to hate the rest of the world. Given the threat of nuclear annihilation, Jonas has been thrown into a spiritual crisis. His sense of meaninglessness and despair has driven him to consider suicide. Mrs. Persson is at her wit's end and turns to Tomas for help. At first Tomas offers the advice expected of the clergy: 'We must trust in God.'[6] Jonas had been avoiding eye contact until then, but at this remark he glares at Tomas, almost angrily. There's a reverse shot then of Tomas, now lowering his eyes, with an expression of pain or shame for the trite and clearly inadequate remark. He begins again: 'We live our simple lives, and atrocities shatter the security of our world. It's so overwhelming, and God seems so very remote.' This strikes a chord, but Jonas is still unwilling to speak. Partly to alleviate the awkwardness, he agrees to take his wife home and return for a more in-depth discussion. Tomas is now animated; here is someone for whom he can make a difference, and he anxiously awaits Jonas's return.

In the meantime, Märta (Ingrid Thulin), with whom Tomas has been romantically involved, drops in. As Tomas is visibly ill, she has come to comfort him. Seeing that he is also emotionally distraught, she tries

to find out what's troubling him. 'God's silence', he explains. 'Jonas Persson and his wife were here, and I could only spout drivel. Yet I had the feeling that each word was decisive somehow.' Märta tries to comfort him and seeks, unsuccessfully, some emotional reassurance for herself. Frustrated, she attempts to put his spiritual crisis in perspective: 'God has never spoken because God doesn't exist. It's as simple as that.' This provides a summary introduction to the two main characters of the film: Tomas, who is spiritually ill and distraught over the inability of God to alleviate his anguish, and Märta, who offers her love but is unable to reach him through his despair.

After Märta leaves, and to pass the time, Tomas reads a letter Märta had sent earlier. This is presented via a close-up of Märta speaking directly to the camera, creating an intimacy that lends emotional weight to the monologue. She relates an incident from the previous summer. She had been suffering from a rash (and from a lack of Tomas's compassion) and wondered if Tomas had thought to pray for her condition. He admitted he had not. In her frustration, she prayed to God herself, despite the fact, she states, that she has never been a believer: 'to me your faith seems obscure and neurotic, somehow cruelly overwrought with emotion, primitive'. The prayer is an act of desperation; it's both a means of expressing her personal anguish and a provocation of Tomas. She asked God why she was so dissatisfied, why she has not been given a task that equaled her strength. She prayed, 'Give my life meaning, and I'll be your obedient slave.' The purpose of the letter is then revealed.

> This autumn I realized that my prayers had been answered. I prayed for clarity of mind, and I got it. I realized that I love you. I prayed for a task to apply my strength to, and I received one. That task is you... Beneath all my false pride and independent airs, I have only one wish: to be allowed to live for someone else.

Eventually, Jonas shows up. (In the published screenplay, it seems that this second meeting with Jonas may be part of Tomas's fevered imagination, but there is not much indication of that in the film.) When they get to the crucial issues, Tomas attempts to help Jonas by explaining his own spiritual despair. But the discussion ends up one-sided; Tomas uses it as an opportunity to articulate his own struggles with his faith, and Jonas grows uncomfortable and leaves. The 'discussion' reveals the source of Thomas's religious anxieties. When he began his career as a pastor, he was comfortable with his faith. 'My God and I resided in an organized world where everything made sense... I put my faith in an

improbable and private image of a fatherly God.' As a naval pastor stationed in Lisbon, however, he witnessed the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War.

> Picture my prayers to an echo-God, who gave benign answers and reassuring blessings. Every time I confronted God with the realities I witnessed, he turned into something ugly and revolting. A spider God, a monster. So I sought to shield Him from life, clutching my image of Him to myself in the dark.

His wife, deceased now four years, had helped him maintain the image of a fatherly, personal God. With her death, that image has crumbled, and Tomas is facing the fact that such a God does not exist. While losing a source of comfort, it also means that the evils in the world (including the death of his beloved wife) no longer need an explanation. 'If there is no God, would it really make any difference? Life would become understandable. What a relief... There is no creator. No sustainer of life. No design.' Yet this realization isn't an easy one. Jonas leaves, and he realizes how very distant he has become to his religion. Again, Bergman and Nykvist take us inside the character through their mastery of the images. The camera slowly zooms to an extreme close-up of Tomas. The light steadily increases from the left, where the window is, but it seems rather unnatural. Tomas echoes the words of Jesus on the cross: 'God, why have you forsaken me?' The camera slowly zooms out and the light returns to normal. We feel his anguish over the impotence of his religion in aiding the depressed Jonas. But the experience is partly empowering. Later, after some reflection, Tomas concludes: 'Now I'm free. Free at last.'

Märta returns shortly after this, and they both soon learn that Jonas has shot himself. Tomas rushes to the scene, but Jonas has already died. The police ask him to wait with the body until they can send a vehicle to pick up the corpse. The following scene is another powerful visual moment: Tomas and the body of Jonas before a large, roaring river, the camera pulled back to dwarf the figures in the landscape. It's a visual depiction of spiritual isolation and forsakenness. If Tomas was disturbed by God's silence before, surely now it is much more difficult than ever to reconcile the promise of Christianity with life's realities.

Tomas drops Märta off at the school where she teaches and lives, and he stays so that she can get him aspirin. This becomes the scene for a confrontation between the two that has been building since Märta's first appearance and is exacerbated by the day's events. Tomas reveals

that he doesn't love her; in fact, he's quite tired of all her idiosyncrasies. Because he has not gotten over his wife, he cannot love Märta, who irritates him all the more because he believes Märta tries to mimic his wife's behavior. Tellingly, Märta comments that she never knew his wife. Throughout the discussion, Märta is, of course, despondent. We learned from her letter that she has settled on a single purpose in life, to love Tomas; and now he has blatantly denounced her.

As we move into the final scene of the movie, both characters seem thwarted in their religious aspirations. Tomas has become fully conscious of how meaningless the universe is; he has lost the wife he loved and is troubled by his inability to play the role of pastor when it was most important that he do so. He has lost the personal God, the comfortable God of his youth, but cannot accept Märta's offering of love, which might save him. Märta, meanwhile, has chosen to commit herself to Tomas, to love him unconditionally. His revelations mean that the she will find no joy in the one thing that will give meaning to her life. In short, both are trying to make sense of their lives while being fully conscious of the meaninglessness that confronts them. Märta at least has a glimmer of hope: as Tomas leaves to attend to afternoon services in a neighboring community, he asks her to come along.

In the final scene, Märta sits near the pews awaiting the start of the afternoon service while Tomas makes preparations in the vestry. No members of the congregation show up, but the organist, Blom (Olof Thunberg), and the sexton, Algot (Allan Edwall), arrive to aid in the preparation for the service. Whether it will actually occur is now in doubt. The observations of Blom and Algot, however, give some clarifying perspective on the main characters.

Algot stops Tomas before the service to share some personal insights on the passion of Christ. Algot, who himself has suffered much physical pain throughout his life due to medial ailments, wants to give a different account of Christ's suffering: abandonment. Christ's disciples had all forsaken him in the last hours. The physical torture, he explains, must have been much less than the emotional.

> They abandoned him, down to the last man. He was left all alone. That must have been painful. To realize that no one understands. To be abandoned when you need someone to rely on. That must be excruciatingly painful. But the worst was yet to come. When Jesus was nailed to the cross, and hung there in torment, he called out, 'God, my God. Why has thou forsaken me?' He cried out as loud as he could. He thought that his heavenly father had abandoned him.

> He believed everything he'd ever preached was a lie. In the moments before he died, Christ was seized by doubt. Surely that must have been his greatest hardship? God's silence.

The use of close-ups again helps convey the impact of Algot's words. The camera pans and zooms between them. During the last few sentences, the camera holds on Tomas, though Algot is doing the talking. The sweat is visible on his brow, his stare riveted. Algot's observations strike a chord with the current state of his personal life while making the religion he has been increasingly estranged from seem relevant again. Tomas himself had inquired why God had forsaken him earlier that afternoon, and the movie begins with his own observations about God's silence. Tomas's search for meaning is clearly tied up with his need to reconcile Christianity with life's events.

Meanwhile, Blom confronts Märta while they wait for word about whether there will be a service: 'Märta, for your own sake, you can leave this place, so get out as quickly as you can.' He explains how different things had been before the death of Tomas's wife. People attended church, and Tomas gave inspired sermons. He quotes one: 'God is love and love is God. Love proves the existence of God. Love is a real force for mankind.' But Blom thinks, as Tomas now does, that these are naïve words. With the death of his wife, so went the passion of the pastor; and Blom again counsels Märta to get out while she can.

Märta, alone, again resorts to a sort of prayer: 'If only we could feel safe and dare show each other tenderness. If only we had some truth to believe in. If only we could believe.' In the final shot of the film, Tomas enters and begins the opening lines of the service to an empty church: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts. The whole earth is full of His glory.' The film ends here.

The connections between *Through a Glass Darkly* and *Winter Light* are obvious, particularly in the way they explore concepts of God and the importance of God as a solution to meaninglessness. Both films at some point refer to God as a spider-god, though in *Winter Light* we get a clearer sense of how Bergman arrives at that concept. If one wants to believe in a personal God who is responsible for our wellbeing (as Tomas did in his youth), that belief may indeed be a source of comfort and security. But given the amount of suffering in the world, that view of God may seem unlikely. A spider-god better explains what we see of the world. Both films then make a statement against the notion of a personal God, a comforting creator, as Bergman explains in an interview recorded during the making of *Winter Light*: 'I had to purge myself,

and very painfully too, of that old idea of God, where God is the father. A father-son-like relationship. A God of one's own creation, a God of security.'[7]

Can we salvage a concept of God at all? At the end of *Through a Glass Darkly* it seems we can, by rethinking God as love. This gets away from the supernatural sense of God, at least, and makes it something more tangible. However, *Winter Light* shows that even this concept is difficult to sustain. First, the film makes it abundantly clear that loving and being loved is often a very complex issue. Märta stakes everything on Tomas's love, and it goes unrequited. Tomas is offered Märta's love, and though it is unclear whether he will eventually accept this offering, the complexities of his own life make it difficult for him to do so. Even aside from the complications of attaining loving relationships in our personal lives, on a broader level the idea that we could find meaning in our lives because there is love in the world rings hollow in a world threatened by hatred and mass annihilation. Bergman explains that the concept of God as love is also an unrealistic attempt at finding security.

> The gist of [*Through a Glass Darkly*], and the credo behind it, is that God is love and love is God. The proof of God is the existence of love as something very concrete in the human world. And then you know, which is the eerie part, I've taken on this whole problem in *Winter Light*. To be forced to tear apart this whole idea of God which is a search for security... Here's this fisherman with his fear of the Chinese and their latent threat of war. It's hard to tell a man sitting in front of you, 'Stop worrying about the Chinese, because God is love.' Or: 'You should go on feeling secure, as love is what matters.'[8]

Is there anything left at all, then, of God or religiosity at the end of *Winter Light*? The last film in the trilogy, *The Silence*, suggests the utter silence or absence of God. There is no reference to God at all in this film, and the three main characters are equally devoid of deep or fulfilling human connections. Beginning with that movie, religion no longer seems able to address the problem of meaninglessness that plagues Bergman's characters. However, both *Winter Light* and *Through a Glass Darkly* exhibit religiosity in a different sense than the way explicitly identified by Bergman. If we change our notion of religiosity away from formulations of God and focus it instead on the attitude of religious

individuals, these films offer excellent examples and lessons about the search for meaning and the role of religiosity.

The death of God

When Bergman's characters encounter God's silence, the real issue seems to be their inability to reconcile a loving, personal God with the bleak reality of the world and their lives. The characters' views are the product of an age where science has made it difficult to believe in the supernatural, and the atrocities of the twentieth century make it even more difficult to believe in a supreme being capable of ensuring that goodness prevails. These are largely the motivations for Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God, a metaphorical reference to an important cultural change of perspective on religious matters. This is, of course, a provocative manner of making a cultural observation (which is certainly why Nietzsche, ever the provocateur, used it), but atheist and religious existentialists alike must agree that the intellectual and social climate of modern times has forced the transformation of religious belief. An examination of Nietzsche's view on this topic, together with a consideration of the different directions that twentieth century existentialists have developed that view, will, I believe, help make sense of Bergman's characters.

The death of God is not meant to be taken literally, as if God has once existed and no longer does. As described in Chapter 1, this concept refers to the fact that Western society is no longer centered by belief in the Judeo-Christian idea of God. This is not due to rampant atheism but an acknowledgement that science has undermined the role of God in understanding the world. Due to the insights of thinkers like Newton and Darwin, it became quite possible by the nineteenth century to leave God out of an account of the natural world. And even in discussion of human values, God was often relegated to the sidelines; major ethical and political systems were increasingly devoid of any direct grounding in God's will. Under these circumstances, it becomes socially and intellectually possible for people to turn away from supernatural beliefs. Even when there isn't any direct challenge to belief in God, however, belief for many became more ornamental than substantive in people's lives. In short, Nietzsche believed that the Judeo-Christian concept of God is a concept that Western society has outgrown, or, at least, it was on the verge of doing so. One of Nietzsche's most colorful pieces describes all this in the words of a madman who appears in the midst of the marketplace proclaiming that God is dead. '*We have killed him* – you

and I. All of us are his murderers.'[9] That will have momentous consequences, once it is realized. As the madman explains:

> But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? ... Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing?[10]

Anything becomes possible when the earth becomes unchained from the sun, that is, when the society realizes it no longer needs to be bound by assumptions that had once centered it.

While consciously accepting the death of God may create a sense of purposeless or meaninglessness, it is also makes possible cultural development and value creation.

> What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us – for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto.[11]

But the madman realizes that he is not understood. The general population, no matter how much *in fact* they have removed God from the center of their belief system, still cling to some remnant of this belief. The madman ends his rant realizing that he has come too early. 'This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men... This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars – *and yet they have done it themselves.*'[12]

Winter Light might well be viewed as an illustration of this insight. The movie follows the crisis of faith of a Lutheran pastor and always moves within the shadow of established, organized Christianity. However, the pastor and his congregation are all too often merely going through the routines; the practice of their religion is more habit than it is a meaningful part of their lives. Just as Nietzsche's madman observes that the people in the marketplace have not yet heard the news of God's death, the church still stands and functions, though not in any way that seems relevant to persons' lives.

If the congregation is not fully conscious of the lifelessness of their religion, Tomas and Märta clearly are. Tomas announces early in the film that he is distressed over 'God's silence'. In fact, a central theme

of the film is Tomas's attempt to come to terms with the death of the traditional, theistic notion of God: the personal God who exists as an omnipotent and omnibenevolent version of ourselves. It is this theistic God who, if He exists, is transformed into the spider-god in both *Through a Glass Darkly* and *Winter Light*. It is this concept of God who Tomas feels has forsaken him and who he attempts to put behind him when he utters, 'Now I am free.' In some ways, Tomas embodies in miniature the phenomenon of the death of God. Before the death of his wife, his sermons were hopeful and the church was full; now that he, the spiritual center of the church, has lost the ability to believe in the loving, personal God, the church has lost its purpose as well. Similarly, Nietzsche thinks that the church had once played a central, defining role in Western culture, but with the decline of belief in the supernatural there is a matching decline in the ability of the religion to center the culture and provide meaning.

One natural response to the death of God is forlornness. This is one of the existential emotions identified by Sartre: the sense that there is no longer a source of truth or answers outside of us that can provide meaning. Sartre undauntedly affirms his atheism in 'Existentialism is a Humanism'.

> The existentialist... thinks it very distressing that God does not exist, because all possibility of finding values in a heaven of ideas disappears along with Him; there can no longer be an *a priori* Good, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it... So in the bright realm of values, we have no excuse behind us, nor justification before us. We are alone, with no excuses.[13]

In *Winter Light*, Tomas conveys this sense of forlornness throughout the film. Algot's theory that Christ's greatest suffering was due to his abandonment clearly moves Tomas; he too feels abandoned by God to the point that he utters the same words as Jesus on the cross, which is perhaps the epitome of forlornness: 'God, why have you forsaken me?'

There is something more than forlornness occurring in this movie, however. Forlornness is all about a feeling of abandonment by a personal God, the 'perfect and infinite consciousness' that can effectively intervene in the world if He so chooses. While Tomas and Jonas in *Winter Light*, and perhaps Minus and David in *Through a Glass Darkly*, experience this forlornness, the characters do not give up trying to find some way to make sense of the pain and absurdity that constitute so much of their lives. As I will suggest below, they never give up being religious

even if they give up on religion. There is a difference between religion in the traditional sense of that word and the religious attitude or state of mind of the individual, a distinction made by religious existentialists like Kierkegaard and Tillich. It is in light of this distinction that we can best appreciate the subtlety and profoundness of Bergman's films.

Religiosity without a religion

Kierkegaard famously distinguishes between the religious individual and the organized practice of religions. According to Kierkegaard, the truth of a religious belief is to be found in subjectivity, or 'inwardness'. Objective facts, devoid of the subjective attitude that imbues them with meaning, are thereby without religious significance. Treating God's existence as a fact to be determined logically, for example, is to miss the point about believing in God. The essence of faith is the inner passion that it brings forth, and much less the demonstrable fact of God's existence. The essence of faith is the meaningful *how* of belief, not the factual *what*.

In one sense, it seems that at least some of Bergman's characters have the sort of faith that Kierkegaard describes. If being religious consists of a passionate, inner attitude, then most of Bergman's main characters are religious, even the unbelievers. Who could say that Märta or Karin do not have passionate inner lives, whatever the status of their belief in God? But for Kierkegaard, true faith must be belief in God, at the end of the day; it is belief in God, despite lack of evidence, that arouses the greatest spiritual passion. We believe, we take a leap of faith, because it is meaningful to do so, not just because objectively we think it's true. Only then will we be in the truth of God's existence, which exists personally and subjectively. Bergman's characters do not make that leap, because they remain grounded in a degree of rationality that shapes their willingness to believe. Specifically, they are unwilling to accept the existence of a benevolent God because such a being is inconsistent with the world about them. For example, when David urges Minus to find something to hold onto, Minus replies, 'What would that be? A god? Give me some proof of God. You can't.'

Since Bergman's characters demand a rational reconciliation between the world and the existence of God, they fail to be fully religious in Kierkegaard's sense. Yet it seems that we are missing something important about being religious if we ignore the yearnings of these characters, which seem to be genuine, spiritual yearnings, on the basis that they do not have a theistic God as their object. To truly appreciate the way in which these characters are religious, it's necessary to broaden the

meaning of religiosity. For that purpose I think the writings of Paul Tillich do a much better job than those of Kierkegaard.

For Tillich, like Kierkegaard, religiosity is first and foremost a matter concerning the inner attitude of the experiencing individual. As described in Chapter 1, Tillich defines being religious as being willing to confront questions about the meaning of life, taking seriously issues about meaning and purpose instead of being consumed entirely by the day-to-day concerns of work, school, relationships, etc. I will return to this idea of religiosity as an attitude toward the meaning of life later. First, it will help to look a little deeper into Tillich's understanding of the human condition and the plight of humanity in our time.

As conscious beings, we know we exist; we are immediately aware that we have some degree of being, a point that Descartes so famously points out in the famous statement, 'I think, therefore I am'. But we are also aware that we are limited creatures, threatened by nonbeing. Death, for example, is the ultimate form of nonbeing, but we experience nonbeing whenever we fail to be what we know we might be. Each cultural epoch manifests the threat of nonbeing differently. Whereas past periods might have been more concerned with the fear of death or moral failure, our period is marked by the threat of meaninglessness. As we saw with Antonioni's depiction of the world, modern institutions that are successful at a material level also undermine the ability to find meaning. 'The breakdown of absolutism, the development of liberalism and democracy, the rise of technical civilization... these are the sociological presuppositions for the third main period of anxiety. In this the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness is dominant.'[14] This also describes the conditions that lead to Nietzche's death of God, and in general we can say that the challenge of religion is to find a home amongst these developments.

As described in Chapter 1, one particular way in which we manifest our desire for being is through having an ultimate concern. That is, we are capable of caring about something to such an extent that it would literally mean everything to us. This is similar to the idea of a fundamental project discussed in connection with Sartre in the previous chapter: the idea that all of our various minor concerns are made sense of by an overriding ultimate concern. Now, an ultimate concern which would address the threat of being and subsequent problem of meaninglessness is one that has 'the power of threatening and saving our being'.[15] The only thing that can be a satisfying object of ultimate concern, then, is the thing that has the fullest amount of being: being itself.

How, though, do we talk about such an absolutely abstract notion as 'being itself?' For Tillich, the realm of religion is the only one suitable for such a task. Being itself is indicated by the term 'God'. But this is not the God that most religious persons have in mind. Most importantly, it is not a personal God, or any sort of distinct entity. God is not a being like other beings – beings which have some distinctions that would make them concrete or discrete. It is not something or someone. Rather, God is the ground of all being. After we say that much, though, it is difficult to say much more about it. However, since God is manifest in the entire structure of being (as the ground), it can be approached cognitively by seeing God within and behind existing things, as their ultimate source. Specifically, we look at certain things or events as symbolic of, or pointing to, God. And, in fact, all of religious terminology, if it is to treat the nature of God accurately, must be thought of as symbolic in nature; a literal interpretation of, say, Biblical events would reduce them to mere facts, and facts are concrete and necessarily limited, thus inherently unlike the ultimate ground of being.

The search for an ultimate concern, then, leads naturally to God. As Tillich explains:

> 'God' is the answer to the question implied in man's finitude; he is the name for that which concerns man ultimately... It means that whatever concerns a man ultimately becomes god for him, and, conversely, it means that a man can be concerned ultimately only about that which is god for him.[16]

So, anything can be a god for me, with a small 'g'. Money can be my god, for example, if that seems to be the one interest that subsumes all others. But money, country, fame, etc. are all 'idols', that is, while we think that such concerns could be ultimate for us, they do not really reflect what should ultimately concern us – the ground of being itself. The legitimate content of an ultimate concern ought to be the thing that is *most* ultimate: God, the ground of being. He does admit that we can have concerns that are ultimate with a misplaced *content*; but these idols will not be able to sustain a concern that is truly ultimate, and those who go down that road will likely be disappointed by the inability of their god to deliver them from meaninglessness.[17]

Ultimately, Tillich believes that the Christian concept of God is the most adequate of our time, though he is quick to point out that we must take Christian beliefs symbolically and not literally. Because Jesus symbolizes the union between finite humanity and God as the ground of

being itself, it helps make sense of our relationship to the ground of being. Of course, given his treatment of religious events as symbols, Tillich's views are at odds with much of traditional Christianity. In fact, Tillich thinks that many contemporary religions fail us precisely because their inability to treat religious language symbolically results in a failure to produce real religious insights. He warns fellow Christians 'that if we are not able to make understandable to our contemporaries that we speak symbolically when we use such language, they will rightly turn away from us, as from people who still live in absurdities and superstitions'.[18] The real goal of religion should not be to make its followers comfortable but to overcome anxiety and estrangement from meaning, and for that purpose there is an urgent role for religion. We live at a time when the social institutions that normally serve the purpose of reducing anxiety have lost their ability to allow individuals to participate in something meaningful beyond themselves. 'In periods of great changes these methods [of addressing anxiety] no longer work. Conflicts between the old, which tries to maintain itself, often with new means, and the new, which deprives the old of its intrinsic power, produce anxiety in all directions.'[19] Religious views that might have made sense a few hundred years ago are distorted and meaningless in a world where science and technology flourish. Religions must offer a worldview consistent with intellectual developments, not at odds with them.

The way in which Bergman's characters attempt to make sense of religion provides a good example of Tillich's view of religiosity. Ironically, their inability to accept the personal, theistic 'security God' is an indication that they are aware of the inadequacy of a religion that is too literal and too steeped in the supernatural. The practitioners who dutifully attend church out of sheer habit, in fact, have likely lost their religious dimension. In both *Through a Glass Darkly* and *Winter Light* there is an attempt to rethink God in a way that address the meaninglessness of their lives. David, in *Through a Glass Darkly,* admits how meaningless his life has been in a conversation to Martin. In fact, we learn that at one point in the film he almost took his life. He was saved by the realization of his love and commitment for his family, and the interpretation of God as love at the end of the film is the culmination of this attitude.

God as love, in fact, is an attempt to identify an ultimate concern, something that people can ground themselves in; and this is another way in which Bergman's characters exhibit Tillich's sense of religiosity. Both *Through a Glass Darkly* and *Winter Light* advance this theme to some degree. Recall David's explanation of God to Minus: 'Suddenly

the emptiness turns into abundance, and despair into life. It's like a reprieve, Minus, from a death sentence.' In *Winter Light*, Märta adopts a similar position. Without explicitly equating God with love, she makes her love of Tomas the center of her life. She had 'prayed' to be given something that would give her life meaning, and feels that in a sense her prayer was answered when she realized that loving Tomas would be the one goal that would make everything else make sense. This makes love, and specifically love of Tomas, her ultimate concern; and since, according to Tillich, your ultimate concern is your god, that effectively makes this love her god. In the final scene, when Blom advises her to 'get out as quickly as you can', she clearly intends not to. Though her love is unrequited, she does not give up on the project that will give her life meaning.

These films do not offer a complete example of Tillich's views, however. Even though some of the characters try to find an ultimate concern with love, this is not the sort of ultimate concern that can fully address the anxiety over nonbeing, according to Tillich. Particularly when love is directed at a specific individual, as with Märta's love for Tomas, one is grounding oneself in another finite being. While Tillich would see nothing wrong with this as long as the concrete being was considered a manifestation of the infinite ground of being, nothing like that is indicated in the film. Instead, Bergman's characters tend to turn to other persons or relationships as a means providing meaning in their lives (which is also true in most other Bergman films).[20] Another way in which Bergman's films depart from Tillich's religiosity is in their failure to sufficiently advocate a new role for Christianity. If anything, the Christian myths and symbols are made to seem inadequate to the problem of meaninglessness. The church, both in its physical manifestations in the film and in the actions of the practitioners, is cold and austere compared to the inner struggles and yearnings of the main characters.

Despite the ways in which these films fail to live up to some of these specific aspects of Tillich's religiosity, however, they excel at what I believe is the crucial element of his views: the dimension of depth. This is the attitude of the individual who asks passionately questions about the meaning of life. When we are in touch with this 'religious dimension', we are willing to ask, 'What is the meaning of life? Where do we come from, where do we go to? What shall we do, what should we become in the short stretch between birth and death?'[21] All of the other elements in Tillich's view, like the anxiety of over nonbeing, an ultimate concern, the nature of God, etc., all require that these are meaningful

questions for us. Much like Kierkegaard before him, Tillich thinks that the core aspect of being religious is simply that we care about these deeper, meaningful issues. Again, it is the *how* of believing rather than the *what* (the object of belief) which fundamentally characterizes the religious attitude.[22] In fact, merely understanding that there *is* another sort of value beyond the horizontal dimension of practical, every-day concerns is the beginning of a genuinely religious attitude, regardless of our success in actually finding answers.

> The real answer to the question of how to regain the dimension of depth is not given by increased church membership or church attendance, not by conversion or healing experiences. But it is given by the awareness that we have lost the decisive dimension of life, the dimension of depth, and that there is no easy way of getting it back. Such awareness is in itself a state of being grasped by that which is symbolized in the term, dimension of depth.[23]

Bergman's characters, regardless of how successfully they attain the meaning they are looking for, are consciously grappling with the issue of the meaning of their lives. Märta does so in her letter to Tomas. Tomas voices his forlornness directly to God, and reveals the extent of his inner turmoil regarding faith while frantically attempting to persuade Jonas not to kill himself. David and Minus muse over the possibility that God is love in their ability to make sense of why Karin should have to be subject to the ravishes of her illness. These characters are religious because they are willing to become conscious of the spiritual emptiness of their lives and search passionately for answers, despite how unsuccessful they may be in finding those answers. Frank Gado makes the similar observations in his psychoanalytic study of Bergman's films: 'It is the intensity with which the questions are posed that gives these films their power: In comparison, the redemptive "truths" toward which the questions presumably lead ring false.'[24] And with respect to *Winter Light* in particular, it seems to me that Gado is just right in identifying the subtle way in which religiosity is expressed. It is less in the trappings of the Lutheran church, and much more in the passionate search for meaning. 'But the film is religious in the sense that religion concerns fundamental values, not in any narrowly theological respect', writes Gado.[25] Really, the film would be religious in this sense even if it were set in a factory and not a church.

Similarly, Astrid Söderbergh Widding criticizes the tendency of Swedish commentators on Bergman to consider religiosity only when

there is explicit reference to God; religious analysis is more fruitful when one adopts a 'wider perspective' about religion. Doing so would allow us to understand Bergman, as filmmaker, as exploring new ways of understanding religiosity. 'Here, images have gained more importance than words. Here at last, there is enough room for various meanings.'[26] I think using Bergman to understand religiosity as dimension of depth accomplishes just what Widding suggests. The images which convey the passion of the characters as they deal with meaning-of-life questions is surely part of a wider perspective on religion than the traditional Lutheranism to which the characters attempt to cling. Like Tillich, Widding sees this as a movement forward. The depiction of religious symbols discussed above, for example, helps us understand their limitations as sources of meaning for those who can no longer authentically identify with them. 'Bergman makes a clean sweep of Christian imagery in order to be able to turn the page. The images have to be broken down, to be destroyed because they are fatal and untruthful. What will come after the iconoclasm is a different question.'[27] While Widding's point is focused more on the transformative use of religious imagery, I think it fits the wider point that the search for religiosity is a part of the search for meaning, and as such it extends beyond the narrow confines of specific organized religions.

Note how the open narrative helps include the spectator in the quest for meaning. We do not know if Märta and Tomas will continue to stay together or if either will find emotional and spiritual healing, but that uncertainty helps us emphasize the spiritual yearning. Had the movie ended with Tomas coming to his senses and passionately embracing a smiling, happy Märta, then the effect would be entirely different. The spiritual crises leading up to that moment would have been resolved, and likely we would have read the film as simply a story about the sort of obstacles to true love that we often encounter in Hollywood movies. But the film *is* about spiritual crises, and they often do not have tidy resolutions. In keeping the plot unresolved, our focus remains on that aspect of the characters. Similarly, *Winter Light*, as is true with many of Bergman's films, asks more questions than it answers. The religious issues are left unresolved, but that leaves it up to us to reflect on the questions and offer answers. If the film was more about making a statement about some specific view, its meaning can be judged and dismissed or not on the basis of the viewer's agreement with that statement. Again, the lack of resolution turns the focus back to the fundamental human concerns that drive the plot. It makes us think; and by so doing it helps us open up a personal perspective on these issues.

But even if it's clear that Bergman's religious films convey a dimension of depth, one might point out that the characters ultimately fail to have an adequate religious attitude, on Tillich's view, because they have not put the ground of being as their ultimate concern. However, I do not think that one needs to go along with all of Tillich's views on religion in order to appreciate that the dimension of depth is the crucial element in being religious. I propose that we make a distinction between religiosity in the weak sense and religiosity in the strong sense, which will allow us to retain some of the useful features of Tillich's work while letting go of his commitment to Christianity and his specific conception of God as the ground of being. The weak sense of religiosity is best captured by the metaphor of a dimension of depth. Being religious means being concerned about the meaning of life and aware of the fact that some values are more ultimate, or provide more meaning, than others. This suggests that there are gradations of values with respect to meaning, with deeper values providing grounding for more superficial ones. For that reason the dimension of depth is an apt metaphor, suggesting that values have a hierarchy of meaning that stands in contrast to a horizontal dimension of everyday calculations (even moral ones). The idea of *an* ultimate concern is not necessary for the weak sense of religiosity, but some sense that certain values provide more meaning to our lives than others certainly is.[28] The fact that our obligations along a horizontal dimension are grounded in deeper questions about the meaning of life allows us to think about that distinction in values. As Tillich says, simply acknowledging that there is such a distinction is the first step in establishing meaning, because you have begun to take seriously the existence of a meaningful value or attitude.

The strong sense of religiosity includes the metaphysical implications about the ground of being as well as the Christian edifice in Tillich's work. These are surely problematic notions for many people, for whom these aspects of his theory might lead to a rejection of his views altogether. I see no reason, though, why being religious in the weak sense commits us to the strong sense, and I suspect that Tillich would have agreed. Of course, there is no reason to separate this weak and strong sense of religion if you are comfortable with the more formal, institutional trappings that Tillich advocates; I am merely suggesting that the core of Tillich's religiosity doesn't require them. In any event, the point is that Bergman's characters, even if they do not exemplify the entirety of Tillich's views, do provide an example of the critical aspect of religiosity (religiosity in the weak sense): they care about their spiritual being, and search passionately for ways to find meaning.

As a final observation, Berman's films attest to the importance of the social element in religiosity. Specifically, they show the power that human relationships have in affecting our search for the dimension of depth. While we often think that a religious or spiritual quest is an intensely personal affair, Bergman's films show us how even these experiences are often enormously affected by the role of others in supporting or undermining our efforts. Relationships with others can both hide us from spiritual emptiness (as seems to be the case with Tomas's relation to his wife in his younger, more naïve days) or put us in touch with it (as Karin's illness does with the rest of her family). Those close to us can also be key figures in filling a spiritual void or in failing to fill it, as Märta's love for Tomas is both her answer to meaninglessness and the reason why she remains unfulfilled. Tomas, for his part, only finds himself in spiritual crisis because of the loss of his wife, and it is unclear whether Märta can help him mend the spiritual wound that now causes him such despair. As Widding points out, there is a human silence here that is just as devastating as God's silence. Our inability to communicate with one another at a fundamental level means that we are unable to understand and encourage each other, a point we saw in Antonioni's films as well. 'Only when speech is a real exchange in one way or another, when it is quite openly directed to the other person, can it tell something and so perhaps also liberate.'[29]

In *Winter Light*, as well as many other Bergman films, others are as likely to undermine the search for meaning as satisfy it, but the film resonates with hope. For all the despair in the last scene of the movie, Tomas's willingness to hold the service to a near empty church (Märta is notably the only one present) suggests that spiritual fulfillment and human relationships are still possible and worth believing in.

Conclusion

Bergman's films, especially *Through a Glass Darkly* and *Winter Light*, demonstrate a core feature of existentialist religiosity: the focus on the inner experience of individuals. Of course, 'religion' is a very broad term meaning very different things to different people, and in this chapter I have adopted a specific approach to it based on the works of religious existentialists like Kierkegaard and Tillich: namely, that religiosity is found in the *how* of belief, in the inner attitude of deep-thinking individuals. The main point of these thinkers, as I read them, is that a meaningful religiosity must include this attitude, whatever else it might also include. This is the point that Bergman's movies demonstrate so

well. His characters take seriously the questions about the meaning of life and the impact of God's existence (or silence), and in that way they are certainly religious.

Of course, simply making a connection between being religious and a dimension of depth is only a first step in addressing the nature of religion. It doesn't address other central questions, like the death of God, the salvation of the soul, etc. However, I think that identifying the role of the dimension of depth in our spiritual yearnings is important in its own right, even if it leaves us asking more questions. In fact, that's just the point of a religious attitude as I have described it in this chapter: the willingness to ask these questions, the willingness to challenge ourselves about that which concerns us most deeply. It is that challenge that Bergman engages in when he shows us a medieval knight buying time with Death in hopes of finding some answers to spiritual questions, or when he shows us a member of the clergy asking honestly and passionately why God has seemingly abandoned him.

Bergman's films work so well in demonstrating this sense of religiosity because they succeed in realistically conveying the inner turmoil of persons concerned with religious issues. Even if the characters are in many ways a product of a Swedish world-view circa 1960, they are driven by spiritual and emotional crises that many of us, whatever generation or culture we come from, can identify with. The inability of traditional, established religions to provide meaning and the resulting confusion and emptiness of someone like Tomas is not limited to Swedish Lutheranism. Gunnar Björnstrand's portrayal of that character brings out universal human qualities which many will find familiar.

6

Rethinking Raskolnikov: Exploring Contemporary Ethical Challenges in the Films of Woody Allen

Antonioni's and Bergman's films demonstrate the power of imagery to convey insights pertinent to our existentialist analyses, but in Chapter 2 I explained that a film's narrative is the other important way in which films contribute to our understanding. That is, often (perhaps usually) a film's insights into the human condition is conveyed primarily through the story. While Antonioni's cinema is an example of how narratives can be relatively insignificant compared to the power of imagery, Woody Allen's work demonstrates how much insight a good narrative can deliver. Even here, however, one must acknowledge the force of the visual presentation of that story in its ability to give realistic depictions of how persons think and act.

The philosophical theme of this chapter is a continuation of the general issue explored in the previous two: the difficulty of finding meaning in modern Western society. But our focus here will be on ethics, specifically, the ability to find ethical direction in a world that is cut loose from meaningful moral traditions. With Tillich and the films of Bergman we discussed the challenges to traditional religious beliefs due to developments in science and a growing focus on material success. Many thinkers beginning in the nineteenth century noted the same challenges to ethics. If human beings evolved through natural selection, if no divine plan is needed to explain our existence, then the universe does not contain any inherent order that would direct our moral thinking. Various existentialist thinkers grappled with this issue. For example, Nietzsche's view of morality as the product of social and psychological forces makes the whole tradition of moral philosophy seem more like an oppressive sham than an honest attempt to find legitimate obligations.

And forlornness and anxiety in Sartre's works are due in large part to the lack of any external guide to human activity, moral or otherwise. For all their emphasis on individual choice, however, most of the existentialists trust that their perspectives, when rightly viewed, will nevertheless lead to moral behavior. Woody Allen's films *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) and *Match Point* (2005) challenge this expectation, and they do so while largely granting the basic worldview of secular existentialism. In fact, these films adopt an existentialist perspective far more explicitly (through character dialogue) than any of the other films discussed in this book, a feature that readily facilitates a philosophical discussion.

Crimes and Misdemeanors

Crimes and Misdemeanors has obvious similarities to the work of the Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky. Though Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* is not a philosophical text, it nevertheless speaks in important ways about our ability to make moral judgments in a world of contingent values. The focus of this section will be a comparison of Allen's movie and Dostoevsky's novel with the goal of demonstrating how the movie addresses and goes beyond the book's themes.[1]

Judah (Martin Landau), a successful optometrist and minor philanthropist, attempts to break off a love affair he has carried on for several years with Dolores (Anjelica Huston). She is unwilling to see the relationship end and becomes increasingly more frantic, eventually threatening to contact Judah's wife and reveal some of his questionable business transactions (see Figure 6.1). Judah, perceiving that his marriage and standing in the community are threatened – in fact that his life as he knows it is threatened – turns for help to his brother, Jack (Jerry Orbach), who has vague connections to organized crime. Judah is informed that the situation can be 'taken care of', that is, that Dolores can be killed and Judah kept free of repercussions. At first wary, Judah's fear of Dolores's increasingly irrational and frantic behavior eventually drives him to make a late night call to Jack, who, with Judah's money, sees that the job is done. Judah is crippled by guilt and fear and comes close to turning himself in. Eventually, though, he realizes that he will not be caught, and with time even the guilt begins to fade. He returns to his successful life, perhaps better off than before. As he muses at the end of the film, one might think he would have to pay for his crime, perhaps through his conscience if not by legal means, but in fact he does not.

In a separate plot line, Cliff (Woody Allen) is a struggling documentary filmmaker who begins a project profiling the career of another

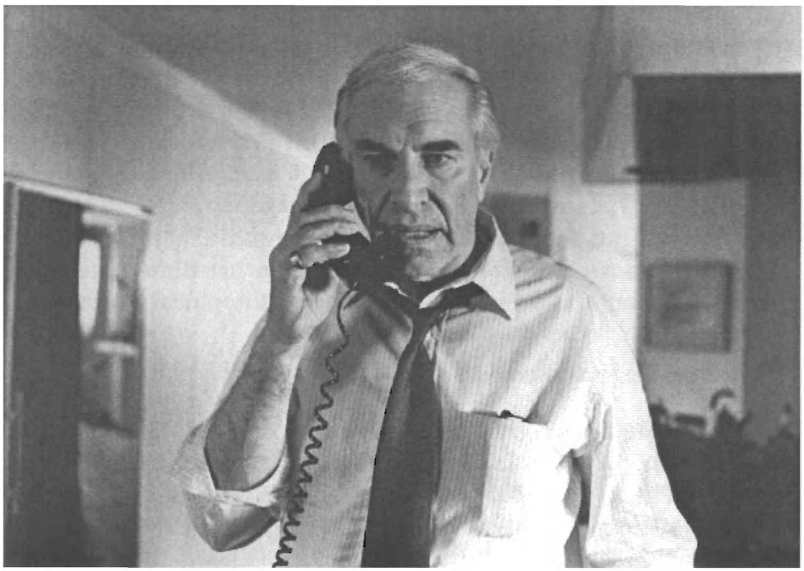

Figure 6.1 Judah is distraught by Dolores's threat to reveal their relationship. (Orion/The Kobal Collection)

filmmaker, Lester (Alan Alda), who is also Cliff's brother in law. Lester is a successful producer of television comedy, and his combination of smug egoism, lack of talent (according to Cliff), and successful career elicit a strong contempt from Cliff, who takes the job only as an opportunity to raise money for his own project. His real ambition is to make a documentary on Louis Levy (Martin Bergmann), a philosophy professor who espouses a theory that both acknowledges an indifferent universe and promotes a life-affirming attitude based on meaningful personal relationships. On the set of the documentary on Lester's career, Cliff meets Halley Reed (Mia Farrow), who shares his interest in Levy and his contempt for Lester. Lester is aggressively pursuing a romantic relationship with her, however, and this is a source of anxiety for Cliff, who has fallen so hard for Halley that he is prepared to leave his already estranged wife for her. Cliff ends up failing on the two major projects of his life: Levy commits suicide, so any interest in a film on his life-affirming philosophy is now lost, and Halley returns from four months in Europe to announce that she is engaged to Lester.

The movie's title refers to the two plot lines: Judah's crime (murder) and Cliff's misdemeanor (marital indiscretion). The difference isn't so much the severity of the moral transgression as the temperament of the

characters. Judah is capable of arranging someone's death to protect his wealth and privilege, while Cliff more or less maintains his integrity. At the end of the film, however, Judah prospers, while Cliff suffers devastating personal losses. This is the real statement of the movie, which will be the focus of the following discussion. What should we think of a world where such unfair consequences can prevail? What sense can we make of ethics? And if we accept the world view of philosophers like Nietzsche, Sartre, Beauvoir, and Camus, who all take for granted that there is no justice forthcoming from an all-powerful God or an inherently just universe, then the question of the film extends to existential philosophy as well. What sense can we make of morality in such a universe?

These questions are by no means unique to existentialists. Ethicists will immediately think of the argument put forward by Thrasymachus in Plato's *Republic*. Noting that those who act justly never actually win anything for themselves, but actually only increase the well-being of others, Thrasymachus concludes that 'injustice, on a grand enough scale, is superior to justice in strength and freedom and autocratic power; and "right," as I said at first, means simply what serves the interest of the stronger party; "wrong" means what is for the interest and profit of oneself.'[2] According to this view, there is no sense to right or wrong other than social conventions that one must only adhere to for security's sake. If you can get away with exploiting moral or legal laws for the sake of self-betterment, you would be a fool to refuse.[3]

This is not quite the view of morality we find in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, though it bears some similarities. The big difference is that Judah is not a cold-blooded criminal who lives by no laws other than those by which he is legally forced to abide. Though his wealth and connections make it possible for him to commit a crime (his wealth, in effect, is a sort of Ring of Gyges[4]), Judah does suffer inwardly for his actions, at least at first. Beyond the obvious fear that the crime will be discovered, Judah cannot suppress a guilty conscience. This is just what Plato would expect; he thought that the immoral person would have an unbalanced soul. If their passions are not properly controlled by reason, or if fear or some other emotion overwhelms them, causing them to act badly, than that person will pay for it inwardly. While Plato does not speak directly of a conscience (and I suspect he really had something different in mind than that), the gist of his views amount to the same thing: those who profit materially from some wrong will suffer inwardly. *That's* why we should be good.

Some commentators believe this is, in fact, what the message of the movie is. John Pappas, also making use of Plato's distinction in connection with this film, concludes that Plato is basically right: Judah's

character allows him to commit the crime, but Judah will have to live with the consequences of this and will suffer for it. We can't imagine Cliff being able to commit this act, on the other hand. After all, we see him make sacrifices for the sake of integrity throughout the film, so we don't suppose his character would allow him to commit a truly heinous crime.[5] As I will argue below, I believe that the film isn't so easy on us. I believe that Judah does *not* pay, at least not in any way proportional to his crime, and that undermines Plato's answer to Thrasymachus.

Before discussing this subject of unpunished crime, let's look at how a more existentially-minded thinker has handled this situation. Plato, after all, believed that the universe was an inherently reasonable and balanced place, operating ultimately under the influence of the ideal form of Good. What if you adopt a view that makes morality more the result of individual choice, as, say, Sartre does? Is it possible for persons to choose a moral structure that allows them to get away with murder? That's exactly the possibility that Dostoevsky explores in *Crime and Punishment.*

Raskolnikov, the book's anti-hero, kills an old woman – a cruel, exploitive pawnbroker. At a superficial level, he kills her in order to rob her and use the money to start a future for himself and relieve the financial responsibility he has become for his family. At a deeper level, Raskolnikov kills to prove to himself that he is above the common ethical rules that guide the ordinary human being. He seems to think that he is intellectually capable of a rare contribution to humanity, one that would allow him to violate everyday morality for the sake of higher goals. Late in the book he explains his action to the one person he chooses as his confessor, the prostitute Sonia:

> It was like this: I asked myself one day this question – what if Napoleon, for instance, had happened to be in my place, and if he had not had Toulon or Egypt nor the passage of Mont Blanc to begin his career with, but instead of all those picturesque and monumental things, there had simply been some ridiculous old hag, a pawnbroker, who had to be murdered too to get money from her trunk (for his career, you understand). Well, would he have brought himself to that, if there had been no other means?... I guessed at last... that it would not have given him the least pang, that it would not even have struck him that it was not monumental.... Well I too... left off thinking about it... murdered her, following his example.[6]

The comparison to Napoleon is revealing. Raskolnikov thinks himself capable of 'monumental things', of being a creator of new ideas or grand

accomplishments, and to do this one must be willing to play by one's own rules. While Dostoyevsky's work preceded Nietzsche's, one cannot help but think of the latter when attempting to articulate the attitude toward morality that motivates Raskolnikov. Consider, for example, this passage from *Beyond Good and Evil*:

> One must shed the bad taste of wanting to agree with many. 'Good' is no longer good when one's neighbor mouths it. And how should there be a 'common good'! The term contradicts itself; whatever can be common always has little value. In the end it must be as it is and always has been: great things remain for the great, abysses for the profound, nuances and shudders for the refined, and, in brief, all that is rare for the rare.[7]

Nietzsche contrasts the common good to the good of the rarer, more powerful few, and that seems to capture the essence of Raskolnikov's ideal of morality. Again, one must be cautious in reading Dostoyevsky through Nietzsche; Dostoyevsky could not have read Nietzsche's work, and many of the progressive ideals that motivate Raskolnikov are ones that Nietzsche would surely have opposed. However, when it comes to the existential core of Nietzsche's view on this issue, that is, the description of individuals strong enough to re-evaluate their values and become a creator of new values, Nietzsche's challenge to traditional Western morality is very similar to the one that Dostoyevsky and a host of twentieth century writers have been trying to come to grips with. While Nietzsche may not have been the first to issue the challenge, he provides the best description in philosophical terms. One imagines that a Raskolnikov (or perhaps the young Dostoyevsky) would have been terribly interested in a thinker who shares even the same admiration for Napoleon.[8]

What makes Raskolnikov so interesting, however, is the fact that he wants to be this type of human being but, in fact, is more ordinary than he knows. If he is to be the 'hero' that he imagines, he must prove *to himself* that he has the strength of character that this type of personality requires. In fact, he admits as much to Sonia, when his previous explanations seem to himself unsatisfactory:

> 'I divined then, Sonia,' he went on eagerly, 'that power is only vouchsafed to the man who dares to stoop and pick it up. There is only one thing, one thing needful: one has only to dare! ... I saw clear as daylight how strange it is that not a single person living in this mad

> world has had the daring to go straight for it all and send it flying to the devil! I... I wanted to *have the daring*... and I killed her. I only wanted to have the daring, Sonia! That was the whole cause of it.'[9]

As soon as the crime is committed, however, it is clear that Raskolnikov does not have the character of a Nietzschean superman. First, he is not even able to make up his mind about whether he should go through with it. When the perfect opportunity does arise and he carries through with the plan, he is so spiritually devastated that he alternates between being physically incapacitated and being so giddy with fear and loathing that he nearly gives himself away. As the police inspector (who sees right through Raskolnikov) observes, there are really three types of human beings: ordinary persons who are psychologically bound to the moral tradition, extraordinary persons for whom traditional rules are only social inconveniences, and those ordinary persons who *think* they are extraordinary.[10] It is obvious what kind of person Raskolnikov turns out to be.

The moral of the story seems to be this: certain individuals may be led astray from moral norms by the attractive ideas of challenging thinkers, but in truth, our moral compass will not let us live with the reality of serious crimes. After all, Raskolnikov turns himself in. It is not enough that he should be captured and made to see the light through external correction; he is driven to atone for his actions through a conscience that cannot be silenced by pride or intellectual analysis. (Dostoyevsky's own stint in Siberia for participation in subversive politics and his eventual renunciation of those politics is a likely influence here.) In *Crime and Punishment*, then, Dostoyevsky shows us that criminals, though morally misdirected at the time of their crime, cannot escape the moral sentiment that constitutes part of the human psychology. As Dostoyevsky wrote to a publisher regarding the novel, 'the legal punishment inflicted for a crime intimidates a criminal infinitely less than lawmakers think, partly because *he himself morally demands it*'.[11]

This, then, is one possible reply to the Nietzschean challenge to moral traditions. Humanity, at least the vast majority of it, is not psychologically capable of successfully overriding the moral sentiment that grounds those traditions.[12] As Nietzsche observes, we have, in the last few hundred years, reached a stage of intellectual development where we can be critical of the important moral and religious norms that had been previously unquestioned. That critical perspective can be both empowering and threatening, and Raskolnikov shows us both possibilities. At the end of the day, however, our humanity draws us back from

the precipice, or at least it helps us find our way back if we should go over it.

Is Judah a modern Raskolnikov? He is and he is not. *Crimes and Misdemeanors* is a fascinating recreation of the basic themes of Dostoyevsky's novel, but there are clear differences in the central characters and in the resolution of the moral dilemma – differences, I will argue, that make Allen's treatment of the problem a more thoughtful description of contemporary moral horizons and how they are challenged.

The similarities are obvious. Both Raskolnikov and Judah are responsible for murder, both assume they are exceptions to traditional moral law (at least, prior to the murder), and both despair after the deed is done. In general, the crucial nature of Judah's character is similar to Raskolnikov: neither character is really a moral monster. Though the acts are, perhaps, monstrous – 'pure evil', as Judah points out in a fit of self-loathing – the men who commit them are not. They simply take to extremes the doubt or challenge to morality that anyone is capable of. This is what makes both works so important: they are observations on the difficulty of the human situation. In a world where the moral center is uncertain – where the *existence* of a moral center is uncertain – the challenge to live morally is amplified.[13] It is not too difficult to *understand* Raskolnikov and Judah, I suspect, even though most of us would never follow in their tracks.

There are crucial differences between the personalities of these characters, however, that go beyond the obvious ways in which they eventually resolve their situation. To begin with, the motivations for the crime and the temperament of the criminals are quite different. As explained above, Raskolnikov seeks out the crime. He must prove to himself that he is the kind of person that *could* kill in the name of a higher good, or, as he explains, 'whether I can step over barriers or not, whether I dare stoop to pick up or not, whether I am a trembling creature or whether I have the *right*'.[14] In short, he wonders whether he is the type of superman that Nietzsche looked forward to, however imperfectly he might have conceived of that image. Judah, on the other hand, has no such ambition; he merely wishes to protect himself. He cannot stand by, he says to Jack, and let Dolores destroy everything he has built. In fact, his class standing and attention to 'being a success' is an important element in understanding Judah. The film indicates his wealth, culture, and social position in a number of places: for example, in the dedication dinner that opens the movie, Judah is congratulated not only for his philanthropy, but for his knowledge of the best restaurants in Paris and Moscow and his knowledge of classical music; his home and 'four acres'

are extravagant; friends gathered for his birthday discuss jet setting and cosmetic medicine. Whereas Raskolnikov shuns anything material (and in fact ignores the goods he stole from the pawn broker), Judah seems to measure his success by it. As I will argue later, this is part of what makes Allen's story a departure from Dostoyevsky and more relevant to the contemporary world: whereas Raskolnikov is trying to prove he is a more noble human being, Judah is simply trying to retain his life of material success and comfort.

These differences also have implications for the ways the two characters react to their crime. Raskolnikov is afraid and disturbed, but he cannot get over his enormous pride. In fact, even after he decides to turn himself in, it is not because he repents (that will only come after he has spent time in a Siberian prison), but because he thinks it is the only way to authentically face the situation for himself. From a conversation with his sister, Dounia:

> ... I am a contemptible person, Dounia.
> A contemptible person, but ready to face suffering! You are, aren't you?
> 'Yes, I am going. At once. Yes, to escape the disgrace I thought of drowning myself, Dounia, but as I looked into the water, I thought that if I'd considered myself strong until now I'd better not be afraid of disgrace,' he said, hurrying on. 'It's pride, Dounia.'
> Pride, Rodya.
> There was a gleam of fire in his lusterless eyes; he seemed to be glad to think that he was still proud.[15]

Raskolnikov is most concerned with whether he has lived up to his ambition or failed it, whether he can live with himself *having failed to inwardly deal with the crime.* Judah, on the other hand, is plagued by the same fear of capture, but also by guilt. He at once thinks that his crime is wrong. At the height of his despair, he declares that God must exist because 'without God the world is a cesspool'.[16] That position seems to be temporary (at the end of the movie we hear he is like his atheist Aunt May and will continue arguing with his friend about religion), but it shows that he at least grants that there may be a sense of right and wrong and that he has violated it. Whereas Raskolnikov resists admitting he has done wrong, at least to himself, Judah quite readily acknowledges his guilt, though he is too afraid of the punishment to free his conscience by admitting the crime.

Judah's main concern during his period of guilt, then, is with the existence of some external set of rules that he may have violated. This is articulated philosophically as Judah imaginatively reenacts a dialogue from his childhood between his father, Sol, and other relatives at a Seder, and he at one point engages the characters directly. Sol maintains his faith in God, proclaiming it necessary for maintaining a sense of morality and meaning to the world. He also has faith that any moral transgression will be compensated by the fact that the universe is morally just. 'Murder will out', says Sol. His Aunt May, on the other hand, is an unbeliever; but rather than trying to ground morality in some other way (like appealing to the inherent reasonableness of moral principles or some sort of humanism), May assumes that without God, there is no morality at all. 'If he [Judah] can do it, and get away with it', May states, 'and he chooses not to be bothered by the ethics, then he's home free.' In Judah's mind, if he is truly an atheist (and this is in question), then a murderer will suffer only the social consequences of society; there is no deeper moral order. This is the cause of Judah's anxiety. Is there a moral order to the universe which he has violated? If so, there are sure to be repercussions. If not, it's possible to get away with the crime. In any event, Judah is most concerned about the consequences of breaking the rules. He doesn't want to be found out. Any deeper concern about what kind of powerful, creative individual he is is of little concern to him.

Raskolnikov, then, is guilty of hubris for the sake of his ideals; Judah is willing to forsake morality for comfort. This is one of the differences between posing existential questions in the nineteenth as opposed to twentieth centuries. The spiritual threat to morality is not just the philosophical problem with 'the death of God'; it also involves the intense emphasis on success in monetary terms. In that way, *Crimes and Misdemeanors* is timelier than *Crime and Punishment*: the seduction of amorality today stems from the lure of money, power, and image. In *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, for example, we share Cliff's frustration with the success of his brother-in-law Lester. Beyond his seeming shallowness and self-importance, Lester is also a womanizer and manipulator. His success as well as his ability to win Halley from Cliff, as Peter Bailey points out, is the 'culminating manifestation of universal injustice', proving that decency and 'elevated moral vision' will often lose the day to shallow materialism and show.[17] So again, whereas Raskolnikov is motivated by a higher ideal, Judah (and to a much lesser extent Lester) is motivated by success. In both cases, morality is an obstacle that they feel can be done away with because they see moral values as only contingent and subject to individual choice.

Getting away with murder

So far I have explained differences in what motivates Raskolnikov and Judah, but an even more important difference is in the result of their criminal behavior. Most stories that involve crime involve punishment. This is where the divergence between Dostoevsky's novel and Allen's movie is most striking. Commentators are split on exactly how to read this. Some, who I'll call moral traditionalists, think that the film does suggest that Judah will somehow pay for his crime. (I would put Dostoevsky in this camp as well.) Others think that the film suggests the possibility that Judah eventually gets away with the crime completely. As indicated earlier, I throw my lot in with the latter.

For Raskolnikov, the weight of the crime was simply too much for him to bear, and we are not terribly surprised to see him turn himself in at the end of the book. Though he tries to go beyond the moral barriers that constrain the average person, he cannot; he needs the punishment to restore a sense of moral balance to his life. The alternative, it seems, would have been madness. While we may or may not feel sorry for him, we at least are assured that the universe does still seem to be a moral place.

But is this the case with *Crimes and Misdemeanors*? It appears that Judah gets away with his crime and goes on to prosper, though whether he does or not is what drives the drama of the movie. From the Seder scene, Judah's father (in the imaginary dialogue) had said that 'murder will out', that the guilty party will betray himself or herself eventually, but in the final scene of the movie, we find that this does not happen. At the end of the film, Cliff and Judah meet coincidentally at a wedding reception and engage in casual conversation. Hearing that Cliff makes movies, Judah suggests a plot for a film, which, unbeknownst to Cliff, turns out to be the real events of Judah's life. After explaining the panic and anguish that first follows the murder, Judah explains how the drama eventually turns out:

> And then, one morning, he awakens. The sun is shining and his family is around him, and, mysteriously, the crisis has lifted... As the months pass, he finds he's not punished; in fact, he prospers. The killing gets attributed to another person, a drifter who has a number of other murders to his credit... Now he's scot-free, his life is completely back to normal, back to his protected world of wealth and privilege.

Cliff, in the same vein as Dostoyevsky, says that the plot seems implausible, because 'very few guys could actually live with something like that'.

He suggests the murderer turn himself in, 'because, in the absence of a God, or something, he is forced to assume that responsibility himself'.

Cliff's response is also typical of most existentialists. They are keenly aware of the fact that once you pull morality down from the heavens you threaten to destroy its power to obligate us. After all, if I can choose to live by another set of moral principles because nothing inherently grounds them, then what good is one over another? What meaning does *any* moral principle have? This is the realization of the character Ivan in another of Dostoevsky's novels, *The Brothers Karamazov*, when he says that 'everything is permitted' if there is no God; that is, without an objective grounding to morality, you can choose an attitude toward morality that will justify anything you want.[18] Sartre understands this, and in fact makes direct reference to that quote from *The Brothers Karamazov*.[19] If nothing has value until I choose it, then it seems that everything is indeed permitted. But does that mean that it just doesn't matter at all what we choose? Here is where even Sartre becomes a moral traditionalist. We have to admit that we are responsible for whatever we choose, too, and we project a legitimacy about our actions to the world in choosing them.

> If it is true that in facing a situation ... I am obliged to choose an attitude, and if I in any way assume responsibility for a choice which, in involving myself, also involves all mankind, this has nothing to do with caprice, even if no *a priori* value determines my choice.[20]

As long as we do not try to hide from our responsibility, attributing our values to uncritically accepted values, we will realize that we are establishing or maintaining values by our very choosing of them. Further, I will have to will freedom as the ground of making such choices at all,[21] so in fact a full realization of our human situation qualifies the observation that 'everything is permitted'. Since murdering someone for the sake of convenience, say, implies that I am effectively permitting murder as an acceptable human value, I will likely choose not to murder for just that reason. If I do not wish the world to be a cesspool, then I should not choose actions that would make it so.

For Sartre, then, radically free choice does not mean that I can choose just anything and be indifferent to those choices, and existentialism does not imply arbitrariness of value. In effect, murder *will* out for the authentic persons, since they will be haunted by the responsibility they must assume for the murder. It may not out in the sense that the guilty

party will be brought to justice by society (or by God); but the knowledge of murder will have to be dealt with and may torture the murderer, just as the characters of Sartre's play *No Exist* are tortured by having to account to themselves and others the deplorable actions of their lives. This may be part of the significance of the recurring metaphor of sight and the 'eyes of God' in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*: God sees us, or even if there is no God, we see ourselves, and so have to answer for our actions. For Sartre, this seems to me a way of showing that authenticity and responsibility will ensure that one does not become a moral monster under an existentialist perspective. It is as if he is saying, 'Existentialism isn't amoral, really. Properly understood, one will have a motivation to live morally just as one had under more dogmatic schemes (albeit a very different one).' The same is true for other existentialists. For Camus, despite the fact that the human condition is made absurd by the lack of any objective ground to choices, we do not have to conclude that people will become moral monsters. In *The Plague*, despite the horror of the conditions to which the characters were subject, those who were most authentic in the existentialist sense were also the moral heroes of the book. Morality, he seems to say, is still possible in even the most absurd conditions. And Dostoyevsky, as we have already seen in the case of *Crime and Punishment*, shows us even more dramatically that we are really incapable of getting away with murder. In all these cases, then, there is a reassurance from existentialists that the lack of objective moral principles will *not* result in a world without decent human beings or meaningful moral values.

If we accept the moral traditionalists' view, we will be tempted to read into *Crimes and Misdemeanors* the same conclusion as Dostoevsky's novel, and some do. Sander Lee, for example, sees Judah's claims to have gotten off scot-free as self-deception. Judah is rationalizing and hiding his guilt, according to Lee, and his knowledge of the crime will poison any attempt to find happiness in family or work. 'Given what we have seen of his character, it is more likely that his high spirits at the film's end are temporary, and that, in the long run, he will secretly torment himself for the rest of his life.'[22] Cliff, on the other hand, while down and out for the moment, retains his integrity; and so, on Lee's interpretation, at least has the possibility of finding a happiness he can live with. James Lawler also argues that the film's message can be seen as a statement against the view of an indifferent universe that Judah and Prof. Levy espouse. Note that Levy committed suicide; Lawler argues that this is the result of choosing to think of the universe as indifferent. During the movie, Judah debates morality with his friend Ben (Sam

Waterston), a rabbi. Ben's faith allows him to see the universe as having a moral structure and real meaning. Lawler sees Ben as an example of successfully finding meaning, while it shows the problem with the worldview of Levy and Judah. 'When Judah kisses his wife and walks off into his carefully gilded version of happiness, we are looking at an "appearance," a staged performance, not at Judah's reality.'[23]

I disagree with these readings of Judah. He acknowledges that there may be guilt pains now and then, but by and large, he claims, he is back to normal. He says this almost with astonishment, as if he can hardly believe it, yet it is true; and this does not seem to me the demeanor of someone deceiving himself. The fact that he shakes the conversation off and joins his wife in a warm embrace as they plan optimistically for the future is also telling. Most importantly, however, is Judah's reply to Cliff when Cliff thinks that Judah's 'story line' requires that the criminal turn himself in. 'You've seen too many movies', says Judah. 'I'm talking about reality. I mean, if you want a happy ending, you should go see a Hollywood movie.' This is just the point: if Judah will go on to suffer, then justice is served. Judah would be just like Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov, being punished in this case by his conscience rather than hard labor, and the film would be nothing more than a retelling of that story. In other words, it would be like the movies, where things work out as expected. The point of this bit of dialogue, however, is to suggest that in real life people *do* get away with such crimes; and we must face moral choices knowing that happens. It may not be pleasant to consider this, but the world after all is *not* like the movies, where the moral balance of things will be restored through the criminals' tortured consciences when society fails to do the job. (For the record, Allen himself has said Judah *does* get away with his crime, even in terms of his conscience.[24])

If the 'real' world is one where people can get away with such crimes, what does that say about the nature of humanity? How is it possible to live with such a crime on one's conscience? Judah vaguely suggests that he (the 'fictional' murderer in the conversation with Cliff) rationalizes his deed and that it fades over time. This is another way in which the film delves deeper into the moral psychology of persons than other existentialist works do: being honest with yourself is often very difficult. Facts are easily interpreted in different ways to make life more manageable. The majority of us are aware of this in our own lives: we think that car pooling is an important way to aid the environment, for example, but we do not wish to be hassled with making the arrangements and convince ourselves we have an urgent need to drive our own car. Or we feel we should give more to charity, but we avoid paying too much attention

to social problems and convince ourselves of the urgency of our own fiscal matters. My own discussion with students and friends on moral issues collaborates this: people will protect a comfortable moral position with shoddy reasoning and real conviction. While this is a form of Sartre's bad faith, it may be more complicated than simply saying that we are lying to ourselves. The process of rationalizing is complex and involves a number of ways in which we interpret the world and the moral principles we follow. I know, for example, that I *could* car pool if I really made an effort – I don't deceive myself about its possibility – but I choose to give relevance to a number of personal extenuating circumstances. No doubt I am making them more important than they need to be, but this sort of thinking operates at so many levels that it is difficult to untangle exactly where I am rationalizing from where I am being honest about things. Any uncertainty of exactly what my obligations are and what weight they should have makes the process that much more slippery. Mary Nichols claims that the film's title suggests such a view of ethical dilemmas. In a world where we unquestionably accept the dogma of our traditions, distinguishing crimes from misdemeanors is easy; but in today's world our moral uncertainty allows us to blur the distinction. 'In one way or another, crimes and misdemeanors appear to merge into each other.'[25] If we also consider the modern emphasis on material success, it's all the more understandable how someone like Judah might be able to let the crime fade. Successfully carrying out the rationalization is easier if your life's goals consist of a material achievement that distracts you from asking deeper questions.

So one general claim this movie makes is that the world is a place where perpetrators of serious crimes are able to live with themselves, despite what the moral traditionalist would have us believe. What is more, there are crimes that simply cannot be made up for, guilty conscience or not. The atrocities of the twentieth century modify our views of moral horizons in a way that makes it particularly difficult to buy into the sense of a world that is basically just. As Aunt May points out at the imagined Seder, Hitler killed millions of Jews and got away with it. Now, in what sense did Hitler and other Nazi officials get away with it? After all, many of them were brought to justice and Hitler himself did not live to enjoy a victorious, Arian nation. I think May's point is that the atrocity was of such a scale that no amount of punishment could possibly make up for it. The crime is not punishable, in the sense that no punishment could somehow restore the balance of justice to the world. People do awful things and nothing can compensate for it, nor can any philosophical theory adequately explain it away. This is

most dramatically illustrated by the suicide of Professor Levy. Despite his ability to confront directly the contemporary challenge to ethics, he had always remained an optimist until inexplicably throwing himself out a window. As Halley observes, 'no matter how elaborate a philosophical system you work out, in the end, it's got to be incomplete'.

Crimes and Misdemeanors poses the existentialists' challenge to morality at a deeper level than other thinkers have gone. Prior to this film, we might have already been asking tough moral questions. What values should I adopt? Can I make myself an exception to the rules? How do I find meaning in an indifferent universe? The film asks these questions as well, but it asks another: what reason is there to be moral in a world that is unjust? In the *real* world, people can and do rationalize values. When Judah relates his crime to Cliff at the end of the movie, he does not lie, nor is it obvious that he deceives himself about his ability to overcome the crime. He seems fully aware of its implications but is capable of living with that knowledge while enjoying a satisfying life. Perhaps the real challenge to finding values and escaping meaninglessness, then, is not merely facing the anguish of choice and responsibility, but choosing with the knowledge that murder really *is* possible. People really *can* make such choices and get away with it in a way that Sartre's characters from *No Exit* could not. After watching *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, existential awareness poses a more difficult task with regard to these issues than we get from reading other existentialists. Raskolnikov, we feel, must suffer inwardly until he can accept his punishment, and that is reassuring. Judah gets over it, and that makes authentically confronting an ethically ambiguous world more challenging. I see the value of this film not as a statement on how to deal with the ambiguities of morality in the contemporary world, especially if you have adopted the secular existentialist view, but as a statement on just how difficult it is to maintain moral integrity in a world marked by materialism and easy rationalizations. Of course, that also makes persons who can retain ethical integrity despite the sorts of circumstances conveyed in the film far more heroic.

Closely linked to the problem with morality is the problem with meaninglessness. This issue becomes much clearer in *Match Point*, but there are elements of it here. If all actions are morally the same, form the point of view of the indifferent universe, then why does any one life have more meaning than another? Cliff has more moral integrity than Judah, but what difference does that make if Judah wins and Cliff loses? The final scenes of the movie, however, do offer some suggestions about finding meaning in a morally indifferent universe. As the movie closes, the voice

of Levy makes some final remarks over various scenes featuring the movie's characters. Levy explains that 'we are all faced ... with agonizing decisions, moral choices. ... but we define ourselves by the choices we have made. We are in fact, the sum total of our choices.' This is clearly a Sartrean view, and it suggests that one need not abandon the basic premise of secular existentialism in order to find meaning. Even if life isn't fair, the closing reflections seem to suggest, we can still manage to create for ourselves enough meaningful moments to make life worthwhile. Levi continues:

> It is only we, with our capacity to love, that give meaning to the indifferent universe. And yet, most human beings seem to have the ability to keep trying and even to find joy from simple things like their family, their work, and from the hope that future generations might understand more.

As these words are heard, we see pictures of people enjoying themselves at the wedding and, notably, a picture of Cliff with his niece, reminding us that even for the losers, there are moments of success. Even if there is no guarantee of justice, there are other opportunities for finding meaning.

In short, *Crimes and Misdemeanors* is brutally honest about the nature of contemporary morality while being hopefully optimistic about finding meaning. One has to participate in a moral world knowing that justice is not guaranteed, that others will get away with crimes, and that everyone is capable of rationalizing and blurring the boundaries such that it does not take an enormous effort of bad faith to live with crimes (let alone our more common misdemeanors). That Allen's observation is not complementary for humanity is no objection to it. After all, existentialism is all about describing life as it is really lived, not as it is in the abstract or how we wish it might be. Given what we know about the contemporary world, Allen may be a better existentialist than those who have traditionally borne that title. I like the way that John Pappas articulates this rather subtle insight: 'As we reflect on the film's pessimism, our thoughts and feelings are curiously provoked and heightened. They are a mixture of the wonders and paradoxes of our own human nature and existence.'[26]

Match Point

In *Match Point*, Allen returns to some of the themes of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Both films concern a murderer whose life lacks

any moral grounding, though there are some substantive differences of emphasis and plot. The most important philosophical difference has to do with the role of luck. In *Match Point*, the central character, Chris Wilton (Jonathan Rhys Meyers), believes that everything is ultimately driven by luck, including success in one's career, personal life, and ultimately one's fate. The film begins with a voiceover from Chris as the camera centers on a tennis ball's slow-motion volley over a net. During the final sentences, the ball strikes the top of the net and bounces straight into the air.

> The man who said 'I'd rather be lucky than good' saw deeply into life. People are afraid to face how great a part of life is dependent on luck. It's scary to think so much is out of one's control. There are moments in a match, when the ball hits the top of the net, and for a split second it can either go forward or fall back. With a little luck it goes forward, and you win. Or maybe it doesn't, and you lose.[27]

Even justice, in such a world, is determined by luck, which effectively means that the world isn't just at all. While this isn't necessarily an element of existentialism in general, it is an aspect of atheistic existentialism of Sartre's variety. We must choose knowing that only our choices, not some external defining essence, will validate our lives and our actions. If you accept this worldview, though, the following questions arise, as they do in this film. Can one live a meaningful life knowing that it really doesn't matter what you do, from the point of view of the cosmos? That is, is life meaningless without some deeper sense of moral purpose in the world beyond our own choices and actions? And how does this view of a purposeless universe affect our own perspective on how to live? Like *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, *Match Point* challenges our view of morality, but this film does more to make that ethical difficulty an issue in finding a meaning to life.

The film begins with Chris successfully interviewing for a job as a tennis instructor at an upscale resort in London. Originally from a poor Irish background, he has just finished a relatively successful career as a pro. Responding to the interviewer's question about his career change, he explains that he doesn't have the talent and drive to be a top player. This remark is telling of his lack of personal commitment to goals, and it follows from a perspective that attributes success more to luck than skill. Later in the film, after his life has taken a much different course, Chris runs into a friend and former competitor from his pro-tennis days. Chris again insists that he wasn't good enough to compete with

the best, to which his friend replies that had he indeed stuck with it, his skill combined with 'a couple of bounces the other way' would have indeed allowed him to beat the best. This brings up an issue central to Chris's character: does his philosophy of luck cause him to give up on meaningful goals too easily?

At the beginning of the film, however, his future looks promising precisely because of his talents. In addition to his physical skills, we see him reading *Crime and Punishment*, and even the *Cambridge Guide to Crime and Punishment*. We learn soon into the movie that he is also a fan of opera. Add to that the sophisticated intellectual opinions that he makes occasionally throughout the movie, and it becomes clear that Chris is a thinker.

This mix of physical and intellectual talent makes him an attractive personality to the upper class patrons of the resort, and he soon strikes up a friendship with one of his students, Tom Hewett (Matthew Goode). Tom invites Chris to attend the opera at his family's private viewing box and then to a party at the Hewett's country estate, and as Chris gets to know the rest of the family, he begins a romantic affair with Tom's sister Chloe (Emily Mortimer). Chris reveals his ambitions to Chloe: 'I'd like to do something with my life. You know? Special. I'd like to make a contribution.' And Chloe, smitten with the talented tennis instructor and obviously thinking long term, decides to help him out, though according to her own sense of what 'making a contribution' means. She has her father (Brian Cox), arrange a position with one of his business associations. Chris is hesitant. 'I've never really seen myself in the business world.' But he has no counter suggestion, and Chloe assures him that it is only a stepping stone, albeit a stepping stone to similar, if higher paying, business positions.

About the time Chris and Chloe begin seeing one another, Chris also meets Tom's fiancé, Nola Rice (Scarlett Johansson), and the two are mutually attracted. Chris, however, is not content with the infeasibility of a relationship with Nola, despite her reluctance, and he takes every opportunity to get close to her, as when he urges Chloe to double-date with Tom and Nola. On one of these dates, the four are discussing Nola's acting career, which, she admits in a very cynical tone, is floundering. Tom comments that she hasn't yet had a break, and that provides another opportunity for Chris to articulate his philosophy of luck.

Chris: I think it's important to be lucky in anything.
Chloe: I don't believe in luck. I believe in hard work.

Chris: Oh hard work is mandatory, but I think everybody's afraid to admit what a big part luck plays. I mean, it seems that scientists are confirming more and more that all of existence is hereby blind chance. No purpose, no design.

This sets the tone for the difference between Chloe and Nola. Nola's background is similar to Chris's. She has likely experienced his despair at how fickle the world can be, unlike Chloe's privileged and fortunate life. Chloe is ever the optimist, trusting Chris throughout the movie, even when the evidence ought to suggest more trouble than she will admit.

Chris and Chloe marry. The couple settles down to a life that quickly becomes routine and, for Chris, boring. Chloe wants a child, and sex becomes a planned program of fertilization; though, to the great dissatisfaction of Chloe's family, pregnancy eludes the couple. At the office, Chris excels, but mostly because he is fulfilling others' expectations. In one scene, he gets claustrophobic after a tense phone conversation, despite being in a high-rise office with glass walls. This is not the life that the Chris who read Dostoevsky had envisioned for himself. Yet he also gets very accustomed to the luxuries of money and power, and Chloe's father provides more money and resources as time goes on. Whatever misgivings he may have about his new life, he quickly finds himself stuck fast, with commitments and expectations all around.

That does not stop him from pursuing Nola, however, who is now the adventure in Chris's life. Shortly after Chris and Chloe marry, Tom breaks up with Nola, who moves away from London for a while and returns later in the film. When Chris rediscovers her, the two advance a relationship that had been largely flirtatious into a substantial affair. Chris takes chances in arranging his trysts. He is late for meetings at work and has to lie on the spot to family and business associates to keep from being discovered. As time goes on, however, Nola is not content to be a mere diversion for Chris, and she begins to demand more attention and the promise of a future together. When she becomes pregnant, the situation comes to a head. She threatens to tell Chloe herself about the relationship and pregnancy if Chris doesn't follow through on promises to leave his wife. Chris suffers severe guilt and at one point decides to tell Chloe the truth. But when he confronts her, he is unable to confess and destroy the life of luxury to which he has become so accustomed. As he confides to the friend from his tennis days, 'I don't fool myself that I haven't gotten used to a certain kind of living. Am I supposed to give it all up? For what? ... To live how, where? To work as what?'

Facing consequences he finds unacceptable, he murders Nola. He first kills a neighbor in her apartment building to make it look like a theft, then kills Nola when she comes home from work. When the police get to the scene, their first impression is just the one Chris intended: they assume that the target was the elderly neighbor, robbed and murdered for drug money, and that Nola was killed as she confronted the killer on the way out of the apartment. But later, Chris is called to the police station for questioning. On the way, he throws the jewelry he had stolen from the neighbor's apartment into the river, but the last item, a wedding band, strikes the rail over the river embankment and bounces back toward the street (a scene clearly reminiscent of the opening scene of the film, where the tennis ball strikes the top of the net). When they show him a copy of her diary, he is forced to confess his affair with her. He pleads innocent to the killing however, insisting that he loves his family and that he would never do anything to jeopardize it, particularly now that Chloe is pregnant (as he had only recently discovered). Detective Banner (James Nesbitt) is suspicious, as Chris clearly has a motive, but he is hesitant to begin an investigation that would be painful and embarrassing. His assistant remarks, 'Well, if something develops we can pursue it. I doubt anything's going to drop into our laps.' Of course, the viewer suspects that the wedding band will drop into their laps.

That night, Chris 'awakens' in the middle of the night, having fallen asleep at the desk in his home office, to the ghosts of Nola and her neighbor. They have the following discussion.

Chris: It wasn't easy. But when the time came I could pull the trigger. You never know who your neighbors are until there's a crisis. You can learn to push the guilt under the rug and go on. You have to. Otherwise it overwhelms you.

Neighbor: What about me.? What about the next door neighbor? I had no involvement in this awful affair. Is there no problem about me having to die, as an innocent bystander?

Chris: The innocent are sometimes slain to make way for a grander scheme. You were collateral damage.

Neighbor: So was your own child.

Chris: Sophocles said, to never have been born may be the greatest boon of all.

Nola: Prepare to pay the price, Chris. Your actions were clumsy, full of holes. Almost like someone begging to be found out.

Chris: It would be fitting if I were apprehended and punished. At least there would be some small sign of justice, some small measure of hope for the possibility of meaning.

That same night, Detective Banner sits upright in bed. He has figured out what Chris has done, and he arrives at the station ready to confirm his suspicions. But it turns out (*luckily* enough for Chris), that there was another shooting in Nola's neighborhood. A drug addict was killed, and the wedding band from Nola's neighbor was found on his body. Banner concludes that the case against a jury would now be too difficult, and decides not to pursue Chris.

In the final scene, Chris, Chloe, and the rest of the Hewetts come home from the hospital with the baby. As they celebrate, wishes are made for success in the child's life. Tom comments, 'You know, I don't care if he's great. I just hope that he's lucky.' Chris tries to look joyous, but that remark obviously troubles him. Chloe expresses a desire for the next child to be a girl and the film ends.

Like *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, this movie explores the challenges of being moral in an indifferent world. The focus on luck makes that indifference all the more prominent, however. In the former film, the question was whether Judah could get away with his crime without consequences, particularly, without the inner sanctions of a guilty conscience. In *Match Point*, the events of the universe largely determine the events, though randomly. Chris lucks into an opportunity to join a wealthy family, with all the consequent perks of that relationship. More importantly, his gets away with murder by an extraordinary coincidence: as his midnight confrontation with his victim's ghosts suggests, his actions were clumsy and should have been revealed, but another criminal not only finds the neighbor's wedding band but gets himself shot to death so that he can't reveal the coincidence. In such a universe, things happen – good things to bad people and bad things to good people – that affect the lives of human beings in ways that are clearly unpredictable and unfair. Chris incorporates that realization into his approach to life: it's better to be lucky than good. Throughout the film, we see him downplaying any of his own skills and attributing his success to luck. We wonder, in fact, if he has put so much stock in luck that it has caused him to mistrust his own talents, as with his position on pro tennis discussed above.

Chris's view on luck also undermines his view of morality. In this way, he is like Raskolnikov: just as Raskolnikov considers that those

destined for monumental things needn't be inhibited by morality, Chris thinks that he is someone special, someone who can make a contribution to life. That allows him to sacrifice the lives of innocents in order to realize his own goals. As he explains to the midnight apparitions, 'The innocent are sometimes slain to make way for a grander scheme.' The Sophocles quote that follows this one ('to never have been born may be the greatest boon of all') is not so much an attempt at moral justification for the murder of his unborn son – it doesn't justify or attempt to excuse the act at all – as much as a statement about the worth of life in a universe where bad things happen for no real reason all the time.

This makes Chris different than Judah in one very important way: Chris has embraced the philosophy of luck to such an extent that it has made life itself meaningless. Judah only confronts this meaninglessness as a consequence of his part in Delores's death; otherwise, he is perfectly content to enjoy his life of wealth and privilege. Chris is far more consistently conscious of the effects of a chaotic universe. Compare the two characters during the period after the murder, while there is still a possibility of discovery, and again at the end of the film, when it becomes apparent they have gotten away with their respective crimes. While there is still a possibility of discovery, Judah suffers enormous guilt but also a great fear of being caught. He primarily just wants the problem to go away. Chris, on the other hand, experiences the crime as a test of his philosophy of luck: a truly indifferent universe will allow him to get away with it. While he also wants to protect his wealth and power, he almost wishes to get caught to show that there *is* something more than just luck. Recall his words to apparition Nola: 'It would be fitting if I were apprehended and punished. At least there would be some small sign of justice, some small measure of hope for the possibility of meaning.' Now consider how the films leave these characters at the end: Judah will prosper with only occasional guilt pangs, but Chris is clearly troubled by the prospect of bringing on children in a world that hinges on luck. In sum, because Chris's life is seen so thoroughly through a philosophy of luck, he is unable to find any meaning in life.

This makes *Match Point* a much more pessimistic movie, overall – one that comes much closer to embracing a nihilistic perspective. It is true that Chris pays internally in a way that Judah does not. I argued above that the point of *Crimes and Misdemeanors* is that real life is not like a Hollywood movie and that sometimes the criminal escapes both the external and internal sanction. We might see *Match Point* as adopting the view of the traditional moralist as outlined above, then,

since Chris's meaninglessness could be seen as the price of his crime, an internally applied sanction that will punish him in lieu of some retribution from the cosmos. But I think that reading – that the film is about how crime ultimately does not pay – misses the deeper point. Chris's meaninglessness stems not from his guilt over the murders, but from the realization that his fate was determined by luck. Chris wants justice from the universe, at some level, and when it is confirmed that justice is a matter of blind chance, then he concludes that no meaning is possible at all. As long as he comes to that conclusion, then it would not have mattered if he *had* been punished by the police; what occurs through luck has no real purpose, and hence no meaning.

The film also promotes a more nihilistic perspective though a lack of alternative views, unlike the variety of points of views we find in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*. Characters like Cliff and Louis Levy in the latter show personalities who seem to share a view of an indifferent universe but who are at least capable of finding meaning, even if that meaning is vulnerable. Yes, Levy ultimately commits suicide, but that does not discount the fact that until then he espoused a life-affirming attitude, some of which is used at the film's end to suggest the possibility of meaning despite all the unfair things that happen to people.[28] The fact that we can fail at finding meaning does not mean that we can't also succeed, and the impression I get from Cliff's character is that despite his misfortunes, his overall attitude toward life is one that will allow him to find meaning eventually, and do so authentically (as opposed to Judah's more glitzy and shallow meaning). *Match Point*, on the other hand, is narrated chiefly from Chris's perspective; we don't get a balancing view from a different temperament. When there are contrasting attitudes, like Chloe's optimism and structured expectations about life's progression (career, marriage, children, etc.), they seem to issue from cultural inertia and thoughtless comfort.

The lack of *thoughtful* alternatives to Chris's perspective, then, makes *Match Point* focus much more on a worldview that equates an indifferent universe with meaninglessness. It's a worldview that troubles the sort of existentialism characteristic of Sartre – that we alone are the source of moral values in a world that provides no easy givens or absolutes. But like *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, this film shows how much that view challenges our ability to adhere to a meaningful morality, or any meaning at all. It is honest with the consequences for really living with these insights, vividly showing us the effects they can have on people. What ought we to conclude about existentialism as a viable worldview, then, given these insightful challenges?

Meaningful alternatives

I see both of these films, but *Match Point* in particular, as asking important questions more than providing possible solutions. While some commentators do see a statement about the effects of immoral behavior here – the view of the moral traditionalist discussed above – such messages are at best controversial. The films' pessimism need not count against their value as descriptions of the human condition in any way, however. Understanding the difficulty of a situation at least better clarifies what we're dealing with. The films challenge us, acting as a catalyst to think through these issues and come up with our own solution. As a philosopher obviously sympathetic to existentialism, I would like to make a couple of concluding observations on morality and meaning that are entirely motivated by the difficulties raised by these films.

The first has to do with the assumptions these films make about the confluence between morality and meaning. Specifically, there is an assumption operative in both movies that *either* we will find meaning in a universe that is inherently just – a universe with God – *or* there will be no meaning whatsoever. This is particularly clear in *Match Point*. Chris's view of the universe, as we learn from the lunch conversation, is based on a view shaped by contemporary science: 'it seems that scientists are confirming more and more that all of existence is hereby blind chance. No purpose, no design.' And it is precisely that which allows him to commit murder in order to prevent making a large personal sacrifice. The film claims that if there is no purpose or design, no ultimate meaning behind the universe, then there is no source for morality. A purposeless universe is an amoral one. And the relationship works the other way for him as well: if the universe isn't just, then it is for that reason meaningless. Recall Chris's claim that he must be caught and punished if there is to be 'some small measure of hope for the possibility of meaning'. *Crimes and Misdemeanors* makes a similar connection between morality and meaning, which we get from Judah's confidential discussion with his rabbi friend, Ben. Their difference about how to deal with Judah's marital indiscretions (this is before the murder) develops into a deeper discussion about the nature of morality. Ben explains his view.

> It's a fundamental difference in the way we view the world. You see it as harsh and empty of values and pitiless; and I couldn't go on living if I didn't feel with all my heart a moral structure with real meaning and forgiveness and some kind of higher power. Otherwise, there's no basis to know how to live.

In both movies, then, there is an assumption that if the universe does not provide moral direction and justice, then life loses all meaning.

But there is no necessary connection between some foundational moral structure to the universe and the ability to find meaning in life. While a moral purpose is often a part of what people find meaningful in their lives, there are also other components to life from which meaning can arise. As discussed in earlier chapters, the project, or narrative, of our lives is a source of meaning: my identity, my goals, my ability to have succeeded in various ways. As the end of *Crimes and Misdemeanors* suggests, people get meaning from their personal relationships, their careers, their ability to enjoy beauty. Many of Allen's other movies, and in fact many of the films discussed in this book by other filmmakers, concern just these goals, which may or may not have a moral component. In *La dolce vita*, for instance, Marcello's failed attempt at a literary career and lack of a meaningful relationship are what doomed his ability to find meaning, but we can just as easily envision him succeeding. For the family members in *Through a Glass Darkly*, the ability to cope with a young woman's mental illness and mend the strained relationship with the family's patriarch largely constitute the important goals of their lives, the ones that have subjective value and meaning for them. In these and similar cases, the values that give meaning to people's lives may or may not have any moral component. Granted, for those who are used to thinking of an external cosmic guide as the source of meaning, the loss of belief in that source may result in a crisis of meaning. But that doesn't mean that there are no alternative ways to create meaningful values. A large part of what the existentialists from Kierkegaard on have tried to say is that our choice of these values generates meaning in the first place.

Even if morality *is* necessary to meaning, the source of the moral outlook need not be founded on some external source, like God or natural law. That brings me to the second observation: these films assume that morality can only be founded in some external reality, beyond human choices. Again there seems to be a forced dichotomy: either there is a moral foundation of some sort, or it does not matter what we do. Chris kills the pregnant Nola and her neighbor to save himself from disgrace and financial ruin. Judah is similarly motivated for his murder. These are clear examples of immoral actions. While both characters feel tremendously guilty, both also wait for a moral judgment to be handed down to them. When neither one pays, their unpunished crime is seen as a validation of a universe without moral grounding. It corroborates Chris's view of a universe without purpose, where luck is the most important influence. It corroborates Judah's philosophical allegiance

with his Aunt May, for whom the morality of an action is determined by who has the might to get away with their actions. Ben's description of his difference with Judah is telling: Judah sees the universe as pitiless and empty of values, while Ben's religious perspective allows morality. Without that, says Ben, 'there's no basis to know how to live'.

This dichotomy is surely false: there are more options than simply *objective morality* and *no morality whatsoever.* For hundreds of years, ethicists have attempted to provide a system of moral guidance that is not based on some inherent design or purpose of the universe itself. It is true that many people see only a religious source as the foundation of morality, and suddenly finding oneself without that belief may result in a disorientation and lack of any clear moral direction; but there are many attempts to base morality on purely human grounds. To name just a few, most modern versions of a social contract are based on the needs and rationality of human beings, not in some natural decree of a universal intelligence or primary logical principle. Utilitarianism is ultimately founded on the purported universal human desire for happiness. Pragmatism encourages us to turn our scientific sensibilities toward the achievement of important values and goals, all of which are always up for reinterpretation and replacement. It lies far beyond the scope of this chapter, and this book, to assess or argue for any particular moral approach. The point is that there are plenty of options for moral thinking that do not depend on having any sort of claim to moral absolutes. The characters who have done away with their belief in a source of morality external to what human beings choose for themselves need not resort to a position of indifference to either morality or other values that constitute the meaning of life.

However, if you are like Judah and your world view has been initially formed by beliefs that do look outward for answers, then the reaction of these characters may indeed seem to be the natural first conclusion. If your perspective has been directed to an objective ground of things, then a nihilism and meaninglessness may initially seem to be the only conclusion. In that case, it becomes a personal challenge to endure that dark side of the human condition, the potential meaninglessness of it, until an alternative perspective can be achieved. Allen's films poignantly capture this spiritual precipice. They show us that the existential perspectives of thinkers like Sartre, Beauvoir, and Nietzsche contain a threat to our ability to find meaning and morality; but the films do not explore the potential for new meanings that these same perspectives can provide. Other films do, however (including some of Allen's own films). In this book, the movies discussed in the final chapters provide a rejoinder to the views of Judah and Chris.

7

Authenticity in the Films of Federico Fellini

Sartre and Beauvoir refuted the criticism of existentialism as a bleak, pessimistic world view. While I agree with them, one might well think there is something to that criticism given the emphasis on meaninglessness which pervades the previous three chapters. But the force of existentialist philosophy lies in showing us where we can go wrong as a means of getting it all right. In order to make a meaningful life, one that we actively engage from our own concrete perspective, it is necessary to understand the pitfalls in contemporary culture. The seductions and diversions of the modern world and its emphasis on money, privilege and status, the temptation to exploit the contingencies of morality and rationalize your behavior after the fact, the difficulty of finding spiritual depth in a world in which traditional religious perspectives have been compromised – these conditions constitute the terrain in which we must find our way. The authentic person does not deny these conditions and finds meaning despite them (and perhaps, in part, *because* of them). The remainder of this book will emphasize the existentialists' attempts to find a solution to the challenges we've been describing in previous chapters.

This chapter focuses on the concept of authenticity, the affirmation of an active participation in the world while honestly accepting contingency and ambiguity. For the cinematic analyses, we turn to the works of Federico Fellini, specifically *La dolce vita* (1960) and *8½* (1963). Fellini's highly personal, semi-autobiographical films provide specific examples of the search for authenticity on the part of the film's characters and the filmmaker himself. Before discussing Fellini's work, however, it will be helpful to clarify the philosophical issues at hand.

Attitude

Heidegger can claim possession of the term 'authenticity' more directly and completely than the others discussed in this book. In *Being and Time*, he explicitly introduces the term and makes it a central theme in the analysis of Dasein (the conscious self defined by its relation to the world around it). Becoming authentic isn't easy, and the main problem is the role of others, the 'they'. We find ourselves occupying a world whose meanings are handed to us. It's easy for us to forget, or perhaps fail to realize, that we are able to participate in those meanings. To the extent we allow the world to be chosen by the 'they', we are inauthentic.

> The 'they' has always kept Dasein from taking hold of these possibilities of Being. The 'they' even hides the manner in which it has tacitly relieved Dasein of the burden of explicitly *choosing* these possibilities. It remains indefinite who has 'really' done the choosing. So Dasein makes no choices, gets carried along by the nobody, and thus ensnares itself in inauthenticity.[1]

Now at a certain level we do have a sense that this is the case, that we have let our take on the world be chosen by others; and our conscience calls to us, making us feel guilty for that inauthenticity. 'Conscience summons Dasein's Self from its lostness in the "they."'[2] One important element in achieving an authentic attitude is simply listening to this 'guilty' conscience, not trying to cover it up or ignore it (resoluteness). Another component is facing up to the fact that we will someday die, as described in Chapter 1. Taking the eventuality of our death seriously makes us realize that our possibilities for Being will die with us, and they are therefore uniquely our own, no matter how shaped or shared by others. After this realization, even if we still accept the ready-made world of the 'they', at least we do so consciously complicit in that world. It is now my world in a way that it never is when it is inauthentically accepted.

What this distinction between the inauthentic and authentic boils down to, I believe, is an attitude. Our day-to-day involvement in the world is one where we take for granted the possibilities, meanings, and values that we share in our social world. If we are authentic, then at least on occasion we must be willing to see this social world as contingent and subject to our own choosing in various ways; and that involves a change of attitude whereby we not only willfully acknowledge contingency but desire the active role of our subjectivity. Adopting this

attitude toward the world is the prerequisite for making meaningful choices, and something like it enters into the views of every one of the philosophers discussed in this book.

Sartre furthers the concept, even if he doesn't lean much on the term itself in *Being and Nothingness*. Commentators on that book sometime describe Sartrean authenticity as willing freedom, which is certainly an essential element of Sartre's existentialism.[3] Understanding authenticity as willing freedom appears more frequently in the book that does rely very heavily upon the concept: *Anti-Semite and Jew*. In this work, Sartre attempts to sort out the complicated mechanics of European (particularly French) anti-Semitism and its effect on mid-twentieth century Jews. Though dedicated to an examination of a particular time and people, this book remains relevant as an analysis of the social dynamic constituting the plight of any marginalized or oppressed group. Here, as with the discussion of meaning in Chapter 4, the concept of the situation is key. The Jews in an anti-Semitic world are forced to choose among social meanings that are imposed on them. No individual can 'be distinguished from his situation, for it forms him and decides his possibilities; but, inversely, it is he who gives it meaning by making his choices within it and by it'.[4] While Sartre's concern is with how difficult we make that situation for Jewish persons, he does so by showing the difficulty of being authentic in an anti-Semitic world. Along the way, he gives a concrete definition of authenticity.

> If it is agreed that man may be defined as a being having freedom within the limits of a situation, then it is easy to see that the exercise of this freedom may be considered as *authentic* or *inauthentic* according to the choices made in the situation. Authenticity, it is almost needless to say, consists in having a true and lucid consciousness of the situation, in assuming the responsibilities and risks that it involves, in accepting it in pride or humiliation, sometimes in horror and hate.[5]

In other words, authenticity is being honest about the factual elements that you must live with. That is similar to the point made regarding freedom and meaning made in Chapter 4 and should now be a familiar point with respect to Sartre: authentically free individuals do not attempt to deny their condition. They do not try to deny the facts that constitute their history, and they do not deny they have the freedom to transcend whatever meanings they find themselves thrown into.

If it is useful to think of authenticity as an attitude, is it merely 'lucid consciousness of the situation'? That doesn't yet say much positively about what authenticity is, other than the fact that it is not deceiving oneself. That is, it is the opposite of bad faith. In fact, Sartre is usually better at pointing out where we fail to be fully and responsibly aware of our choices than describing what sort of personality might be typical of those who embrace freedom. Yet even this indirect approach supports the notion that authenticity is an attitude, because Sartre explicitly refers to bad faith, its opposite, as an attitude.[6] When I have decided to adopt as a general rule the denial of the human condition, for example, by looking for every opportunity to escape the responsibility of being free by identifying myself as a determined persona, then I have adopted an *attitude* of bad faith. Similarly, we might say that when I have decided that as a general rule I will affirm the contingency of my chosen self, and when I have decided to remain vigilantly conscious of my complicity in establishing the meaning of the situation in which I find myself, then I have adopted an attitude of authenticity. Authenticity and bad faith are therefore opposite attitudes, flipsides of the same coin.

However, I think that the more popular and conventional meaning of authenticity involves more than simply avoiding bad faith, even if we grant that is an essential, perhaps *the* most essential, characteristic. Persons might live in honest recognition of their freedom and their responsibility for the life they have chosen, yet timidly avoid any commitment to engage life for fear of making mistakes. Is such a person authentic? Perhaps, but for myself at least, the term typically carries a connotation that the individual has contributed something positively to her or his life. As I will discuss in more detail below, when we say that people are authentic, it is often because there seems to be some committed meaning or purpose they exhibit, one that is uniquely their own. Authentic persons endorse a meaning, and they do so in a positive sense.

While Sartre never quite explains authenticity in these words, he comes close, most notably in 'The Humanism of Existentialism', the popular public lecture that is often used as an introduction to his thought (which is something of a controversy, as some elements of it have come under harsh criticism from both Sartre and his critics).[7] Sartre makes two points that seem particularly relevant to an account of authenticity. First of all, owning up to your freedom requires that you accept responsibility for the person you choose to be.

> When we say that a man chooses his own self, we mean that every one of us does likewise; but we also mean by that that in making this

> choice he also chooses all men. In fact, in creating the man that we want to be, there is not a single one of our acts which does not at the same time create an image of man as we think he ought to be.[8]

The idea that one projects an image of oneself to the world provides a sense of the positive way in which freedom manifests itself. It's how free persons contribute something to the world by way of their freedom, and it is just the sort of thing I think belongs in an account of authenticity.

The second, related point that Sartre makes in this essay involves his discussion of despair. Since there is no human nature or essence or fate that provides meaning to our lives, the only thing that does define us is what we do as the result of our choices. But these choices have to be effective; it is only what we *do* that can count toward the meaning of our lives, not just who we wish we were. A realization of this might be an occasion for despair. Specifically, some persons will despair at unrealized goals when they understand that their life is merely the sum of their actions, and no honest interpretation of those actions can give their identity the meaning they want. In terms of a narrative identity discussed in Chapter 3, we could say we are responsible for narrating our own life stories, and we have no one but ourselves to blame if we have left unrealized the story that we wanted to tell. But this occasion for despair is also a call for action. Again, it focuses a need to contribute something positively.

> Quietism is the attitude of people who say, 'Let others do what I can't do.' The doctrine I am presenting is the very opposite of quietism, since it declares, 'There is no reality except in action.' Moreover, it goes further, since it adds, 'Man is nothing else than his plan; he exists only to the extent he fulfills himself; he is therefore nothing else than the ensemble of his acts, nothing else than his life.'[9]

Note that quietism is an attitude. I have been urging that we think of authenticity as an attitude, and like bad faith, we have a picture of the opposite attitude. But this provides a different element than bad faith: whereas the opposite of bad faith is a sort of honesty about the human condition, the opposite of quietism is a motivation to actively pursue and bring into being the sort of life you find meaningful. Sartre's own life provides a perfect example of the latter. He was a committed political activist who did far more than simply generate ideas. And whether one agrees or disagrees with his views on marriage and relationships,

one cannot deny that he succeeded in living out the image of humanity that he advocated.

Sartre's *Notebooks for an Ethics*, published posthumously though never intended for publication by Sartre, strengthens the idea that authenticity has a positive, action-oriented component and is not merely keeping out of bad faith. He stresses that labels like courage and nobility are meaningless in the abstract. They are merely descriptions of how we handle ourselves *in situation*.

> Authenticity therefore leads to renouncing every project of being courageous (cowardly), noble (vile), etc. ... Authenticity reveals that the only meaningful project is that of *doing* (not that of being) and that the project to do something cannot itself be universal without falling into what is abstract (for example, the project to *do good*, always to tell the truth, etc., etc.) The one meaningful project is that of acting on a concrete situation and modifying it in some way.[10]

It is worth noting that, at least in the *Notebooks*, the vain pursuit of abstract virtues applies to authenticity as well. That is, we're not being authentic if we make it our goal to live up to the abstract ideal of authenticity; rather, authenticity emerges from the way we address our situation. There is no authentic behavior understood outside of a situation. 'If you seek authenticity for authenticity's sake, you are no longer authentic.'[11] You have to *do* something to be authentic other than simply insist that you are.

In sum, the authentically free person, for Sartre, consists of two elements: (a) honest confrontation of one's freedom and (b) the willingness to stand for, or actualize, the meaning that we wish to convey to the world about ourselves. This seems to me largely consistent with Heidegger's retrieval of the world from the 'they', though in terms that lend themselves more easily to describing everyday behavior. However, I want to emphasize once again the importance of conceiving of authenticity as an attitude. That is, it is more than a particular state of consciousness, but a sustained approach to life, a way of living that relies largely on the way we usually and for the most part decide to think about things. If an existentialist were to talk about character, along the lines of an Aristotelian ethics (and I see no reason why an existentialist *shouldn't* talk about character), then one might say that authenticity is a habit that contributes to one's overall personality. But it is hard to describe authenticity, or the formation of the authentic character, in the abstract, precisely because it is an attitude about *engagement* in the

world. This is surely a concept that would be difficult to grasp unless you have known someone who is authentic. Existentialism, which seeks to understand life as it is actually lived, naturally lends itself to concrete examples, and that is particularly true of this concept. (One wishes Heidegger and Sartre made more use of specific examples in their major theoretical works.) Let's turn to the films for just such examples, through which we can demonstrate and expand on the philosophers' account.

Fellini's style

Fellini has had connections with Italian neorealism since his early work with Rossellini, one of the architects of the movement; and he has been very conscious of how his own works fit into that movement and depart from it. Unlike the films of Rossellini or De Sica, which attempt to give a directly realistic portrayal of the lives and environments of average persons, Fellini's work is often fanciful, decidedly unrealistic in contrast to a film like *Roma, città aperta*. Indeed, some commentators feel that Fellini has an oversimplified and romanticized view of the world, which, if true, would make it a dubious choice for saying something important about the human condition.[12] There is an element of sensationalism in his films. Characters always seem a bit extreme or caricatured. Sets often seem to have a theatrical quality that calls our attention to the fact that this is a staged event. In fact, Fellini's fascination with the circus finds its way into the sensibility of many of his films, and many scenes are quite explicitly circus-like, as we'll see in the analysis below. In short, Fellini's style is one that tends toward spectacle, and never far from a comedic element, which seems a *prima facie* reason to think that his films are decidedly unrealistic.

Yet I think that most of his films, and in particular these two, are very realistic in the sense described in Chapter 3, that is, they capture the way we experience life and react to the modern situation. The narrative of the films, and particularly of the main characters, realistically reflects our own narrative regarding the struggle of contemporary persons to be authentic, and that includes the difficulty in even finding a narrative with enough substance to form an identity. Fellini's visual style, even when flamboyant, helps emphasize those aspects of life that are relevant for most of us. Even when his characters portray lives far removed from what most of the spectators are familiar with, the fundamental issues they must deal with are the same ones to which we can all relate.

The pressures on the individual to be authentic in the world will remind many viewers of their own situation, even if they have never been surprised by the dawn with Anita Ekberg in the Trevi Fountain. Commentator Stuart Rosenthal, whose insights helped shape some of my own appreciation of Fellini, gets it exactly right in discussing the appeal of Guido, the main character of *8½*, and his comments are every bit as true for the protagonist of *La dolce vita*. 'The specific problems of Guido/Fellini are unique; his state of mind is not. And since Fellini is most adept at conveying a state of mind, it serves as the common ground on which Fellini and his films meet and engage the viewer.'[13]

Fellini's own views on this run in the same vein. He openly admits to lying or fabricating, even when he is autobiographical. On that point, he is decidedly not a realist. 'Realism is a bad word. In a certain sense everything is realistic. I see no dividing line between imagination and reality. I see a great deal of reality in imagination. I don't feel it's my responsibility to arrange everything neatly on one universally valid level.'[14] Nevertheless, the people and stories that he produces allow him to showcase the difficulties of living. Along the way, we find ourselves considering life, perhaps our own life, and thereby get the reflective distance that is so essential for existentialist thinking. This makes Fellini's films not just a description of the human condition we can use as examples in discussing existentialist concepts, but a catalyst for our own personal confrontation with these issues. Fellini would seem to concur:

> All I do is bear witness to what happens to me, interpret and express the reality that surrounds me. If, through my films – that is, recognizing themselves in them – people come to an equal awareness of themselves, then they have achieved the state of clear-sighted detachment from themselves which is essential in making new choices, in bringing about changes.[15]

This is not to say Fellini is explicitly attempting to teach us lessens in philosophy or sociology or anthropology. Quite the contrary, as he points out, 'I do not make moral judgments, I'm not qualified to do so. ... I dislike analyzing, I am not an orator, a philosopher or a theorist. I am merely a story-teller and the cinema is my work.'[16] Furthermore, as we will see with *8½*, Fellini often very consciously refuses to allow his films to be boiled down to or contained in specific ideologies. This, to me, makes Fellini's films even more interesting as a critical statement on the human condition than if he had set out to make some specific point informed by Sartre or Heidegger (as we might well assume of Woody

Allen). In any event, Fellini is realistic in the way that I've been promoting all along: realistic about human experience. Even when employing a dreamy or sensational quality, Fellini gets us inside the characters. It's a subjective realism of the inner world. It is certainly unlike Bergman's raw, direct exposures – Fellini's sensationalism always keeps us somewhat detached – but the insights are no less true. The use of spectacle, whether it's caricatured personalities or circus shows, becomes realistic once it is understood as a means of magnifying the characters' experience.[17]

Fellini's style does not quite neatly fit into the two strains of realism I've been using: it's clearly a departure from the relatively objective camera used to record the world that Bazin so adored in the neo-realists, but Münsterberg's account of the camera's ability to recreate the cognitive processes of attention, memory, etc. does not quite capture Fellini's achievements. Certainly the latter approach is more accurately descriptive of Fellini than the former, but Fellini's films (at least the ones discussed below) are also highly autobiographical, and that adds another account of reality that is central to the film: that of the filmmaker. As Rosenthal points out, viewers can interact with the content of a film objectively and subjectively, as we have, but 'a third possibility is that the film may lead the viewer to accept the interpretation of its creator', which Rosenthal refers to as 'personalism'.[18] This personalism means that Fellini can show us something about Fellini, in addition to making observations about the state of the culture or the human reaction to it. Fellini's observations about the director Guido in *8½* is so obviously a statement about Fellini himself, that we are offered not just a depiction of the human condition which we judge to be true by its similarity to our own experiences but an account of the concrete, real experience of the filmmaker. To some extent, this is true of all the filmmakers discussed in this book, but Fellini is so explicitly autobiographical that we are allowed to read the film as a window into Fellini's own take on things. We are *shown* how he reacts to the contemporary situation and the pressures of modern life.

Fellini's narrative style should also be noted here. The films discussed below defy the typical expectations of narrative. They are, again, open narratives, consisting of a series of episodes, each of which might stand on its own as a portrait of the characters or the culture. They do not quite add up to the sort of story typical of most films, and there is usually little resolution of the lines of action (though as John Stubbs points out, the final scenes usually haunt us, as proxy for narrative resolution).[19] The focus is rather on the characters, who we come to understand by the end of the film. We get to know these people; even

when the main character becomes despicable (as with Marcello in *La dolce vita*), it is difficult not to sympathize with him to some degree. In short, Fellini's films offer a smorgasbord of images and insights, and as a statement on life, they are some of the best in the genre.

La dolce vita

The tone of this film emerges from the first scene. A helicopter is towing a statue of Christ, arms outraised, first past ruins of ancient Rome, then over the rooftops of modern Rome. A second helicopter follows with Marcello (Marcello Mastroianni) and his photographer (see Figure 7.1). They pause to hover over an apartment rooftop as Marcello attempts to get a phone number from some sunbathers. This mix of a sacred figure with the main character's opportunism suggests the contrast between an old bastion of authority and meaning and a modern sensibility that has little respect for that authority. The free-wheeling, modern individual who does as he likes is set beside the image of Christ, all against

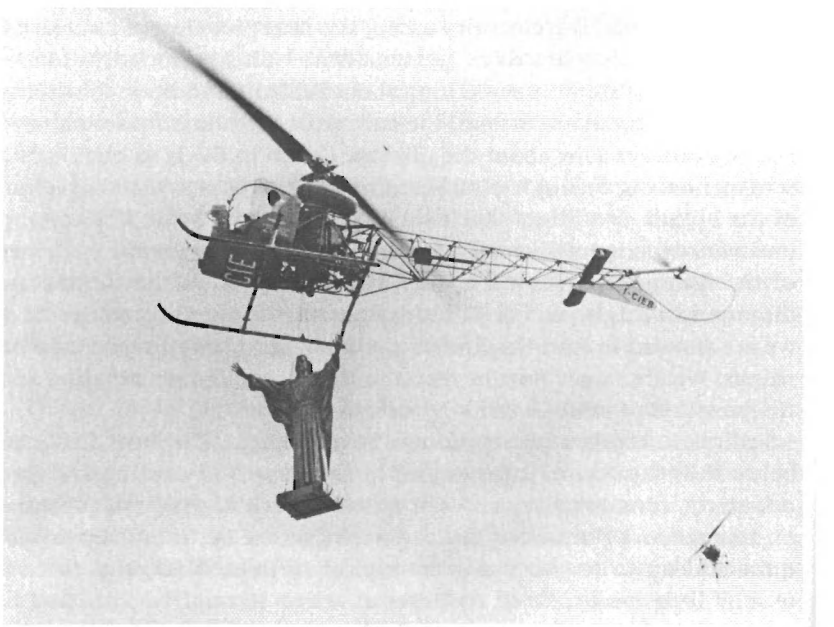

Figure 7.1 Flying the statue of Christ over the rooftops of Rome. (Riama-Pathe/ The Kobal Collection)

the backdrop of the modern rooftops of the ancient capital of Western culture. This is again going to be a film about finding meaning in the modern world, which has become disconnected from its past cultural foundations and now must come to terms with a freedom that can both empower and destroy.

If the opening scene isn't indication enough of Marcello's obsession with women, the first vignette confirms it. This episode offers a good example of Fellini's style in this film, and deserves some closer attention. The scene starts with a cut to an exotic dancer, then zooms out to reveal a nightclub. Coming after the first scene, this is disorienting, but it's typical of all the episodes in this film. The viewer is momentarily disoriented by new settings and characters and must readjust to a different narrative. This has the effect of keeping spectators thinking, but in this film it conveys the disjointed lifestyle of Marcello. He does not have a sense of a greater narrative to his life, and seems to go from one escapade to the next. Fellini takes the spectators on the same ride. At the night club, it becomes apparent that Marcello is a tabloid journalist, on the 'scene' where celebrities are likely to show. He unexpectedly finds Maddalena (Anouk Aimée), a woman with whom he obviously has had some history. She is dressed formally, wearing sunglasses to hide a black eye, and has seemingly been stood up by her date. The two leave together in her convertible and park in a cul-de-sac. There is no sense that this is their destination; they seem to have arrived here from aimless wandering (which is certainly true metaphorically of these characters). Their conversation makes it quite obvious that Marcello and Maddalena are dissatisfied people, and both are coping with their public roles: she, a wealthy heiress, and he, a tabloid reporter distrusted by the celebrities he covers. 'I'd rather live somewhere else, where I don't know anyone', Maddalena admits. And Marcello responds, 'Personally, I like Rome very much. It's sort of a moderate, tranquil jungle where one can hide well.'[20] The reference to hiding turns out to be a key part of his personality. In fact, much of the movie is about Marcello hiding from his own inadequacies and failures, usually by using his position as a reporter as an excuse to pursue distractions that will keep him from thinking too much about the fact that he has failed to become the sort of person he would prefer to be.

Maddalena and Marcello seem to understand each other; they both require distractions. In this case Maddalena takes the initiative: she invites a prostitute admiring her car for a ride. As they drive her home, we get the first example of what will be a motif: a front view of a car (usually convertibles) and carefully posed passengers. In this case, the

prostitute is seated in the back, leaning forward with a casual pose between Marcello and Maddalena. She contrasts conspicuously with the formally dressed, rather stiff couple in the front, who continue their own conversation with little regard to her presence, sometimes talking of her in the third person. When they arrive at her squalid apartment, she has to lie boards down for them to walk over the flooded floor. Maddalena offers herself to Marcello in the prostitute's bedroom, revealing her purpose in offering the ride home.

The contrasts in this scene are effective. Marcello and Maddalena reveal themselves as privileged yet vulnerable and lonely (note Maddalena's black eye). The dialogue suggests they are conscious of their predicament and have some compassion for one another, yet they are aloof and exploitive of the prostitute. They float from the night club to the city streets and to the prostitute's apartment without any real sense of purpose, but with elegance and cool amusement. They are living *la dolce vita* – the sweet life – but for all its debauched sense of adventure, the scene suggests a lack of any real fulfillment for the main characters while it reminds us that while they play, others work and have real concerns.

Maddalena is only one of the women in Marcello's life. In fact, the following scene introduces us to his long-time and unhappy girlfriend, Emma (Yvonne Furneaux), who he discovers on the floor upon arriving home. She has attempted suicide, apparently not for the first time, as a protest of Marcello's neglect and philandering. Over the course of the movie, it will be obvious that Marcello remains with her only because he cannot summon the will to break off what is clearly an unfulfilling relationship.

Marcello's most ambitious conquest in the film is Sylvia (Anita Ekberg), the American actress who arrives in Rome for a movie shoot. As an established celebrity, she is besieged by the fawning press and public, but Marcello bides his time, exploiting any opportunity to get close to her. He is clearly smitten, though they will prove to be an ill-matched couple. He is worldly and half-jaded from his years as a tabloid reporter, and we will shortly find out he is something of an intellectual; she is child-like and spoiled. When Marcello does get her alone, his insistent attempts to seduce her are outpaced by her curiosity about everything she sees. She howls with the neighborhood dogs and adopts a stray kitten, for which he must spend half the night finding milk. When she wades into the Trevi Fountain, and he, following, finally reaches the point of seduction (in one of the most famous scenes in film history), they are interrupted by the dawn and the morning bustle of the city. His conquest, and that is all it clearly is to him, fails; but the episode establishes Marcello's charm, wit, opportunism, occasional compassion, and unrelenting drive for adventure and diversion.

The next episode returns to the contrast between the sacred and the profane, and again contextualizes Marcello in a culture that has detached itself, to a very ugly conclusion, from its ethical and religious grounding. This vignette is also worthy of closer attention, as an extraordinary observation on the inhuman and calculating reality of modern institutions. Marcello and Paparazzo (Walter Santesso), a photo journalist of the worst sort (and the source of the term 'paparazzi') head out to cover a story of children who claimed to have seen the Madonna. Emma tags along. Paparazzo and other photographers bribe family members of the children to pose for them. (In scenes like this, Fellini reveals his neorealist roots, finding just the right persons – non-actors – to portray the ignorant provincials that the paparazzi shamelessly exploit.) The media prepares for an expected visit by the children later that night. A 'director' goes over what the scene will be like, to the point where he has the crowd of the faithful rehearse their roles, barking orders at them: 'Speak up! Why aren't you praying? Everyone has to yell!' He gives them a dinner break and asks them to be back in two hours. The place is surrounded by scaffolding towers with lights and cameras. Fade to early evening. The lights are on, the faithful walk with torches to the scene where the children are expected, camera lamps making the torches superfluous. Fade again to later in the evening. Plenty of long shots help us take in the scene, which looks like a movie stage or a circus big top (both apt associations). The children arrive and the crowd reacts almost violently. A point-of-view shot from the children's perspective captures the frenzy: reporters and photographers advance on them, mingled with the sick and disabled (who have flocked to the place hoping for a miracle). The larger crowd behind press against a police line that barely contains them. Medium shots of the children, combined with long shots that remind us of the circus this has become, follow the sniggering children as they run amok pointing sporadically to various places they claim to see the Madonna. The whole thing degenerates into chaos. When the children's uncle thinks they've had enough, he retrieves them, and they utter a seemingly rehearsed line that a church must be built on this spot. People almost trample each other to tear limbs off a tree for souvenirs, all while a group of physically disabled believers are left in the rain and mud. One dies, and the scene fades to dawn, where the sober remnants of the crowd watch priests pray over the deceased. Paparazzo uses the opportunity to take one more picture.

The scene needs little explanation. The callousness of the media is obvious, particularly the photojournalists, as is the disregard for the church. Many in the crowd genuinely believe; their religion matters to

them. But that doesn't mean much to the journalists who are there to profit from the event. It's the glamour and the money that matter, even to the children's family. Even the sacred has become a commodity in modern culture, and Marcello is complicit in the media which is largely responsible for it. The 'good life' is at its heart hollow and fake.

But Marcello himself is not quite as debased as the paparazzi that accompany him. During this scene, he moves about as the opportunist he is, but he also maintains a sort of detachment from the whole thing. One gets the sense that he is above this fray, and above this sort of journalism. Marcello is there doing a job, but not one he relishes. If that episode suggests that there is more to Marcello than what we've seen so far, we soon find out that he indeed does aspire to much more than celebrity gossip.

The next scene is the heart of the movie, at least for the purposes of an analysis of authenticity. Marcello and Emma attend a party in the home of Steiner (Alain Cuny), who Marcello has only seen on a few occasions yet is a figure that clearly commands Marcello's respect. It's a small group of intellectuals and artists, a stark contrast with the glitzy world of the Roman celebrity scene that has become Marcello's familiar territory. These are the people who can recognize Marcello's literary aspirations, made clear by the introductory remarks of one of the guests, a poet: 'Steiner said that you have two loves and you don't know which one to choose. Journalism and literature. Watch out for prisons. Stay free, available, like me. Never get married. Never choose.' This is an ironic statement. Marcello in one sense does seem to be avoiding a choice. He has apparently had some small success in literature, but journalism pays the bills. However, it's clear from this scene that in terms of an identity, Marcello *has* chosen what is meaningful for him, what he would do in an ideal world: he would purse the intellectual, literary path. The substantive choice that he is forced to make is how much to compromise what he really wants for the sake of the comfort and excitement that surround tabloid journalism. This is revealed in the compliments he returns to the poet's introductory remarks: 'This [her poetry] is the art I prefer. The one I think we'll need tomorrow. A clear, precise art, without rhetoric, that doesn't lie, that isn't flattering. Now I have a job that I don't like, but I often think about tomorrow.'

The clearest insights into Marcello's divided priorities are revealed in a private conversation with Steiner.

Marcello: Let me come here more often.
Steiner: I told you, you can come anytime. What is it, Marcello?

Marcello: I should change environment. I should change many things. Your house is a real refuge. Your children, your wife, your books, your extraordinary friends... Me, I'm wasting my time... Once I had ambitions, but maybe I'm losing everything. I forgot everything.

Steiner: Don't think that safety is being locked up in one's home. Don't do what I did. I'm too serious to be an amateur, but not enough to be a professional. There. A more miserable life is better, believe me, than an existence protected by an organized society where everything is calculated, everything is perfect.

It turns out that Steiner, in fact, is miserable. Earlier in the evening, he comments, 'If you could see my real height, you'll see I'm not much taller than this' (indicating a small space between two fingers). Yet Marcello only sees the successful intellectual, the ideal that he would like to become himself. In the next scene, we see Marcello typing away in some café, presumably inspired and trying to find an out-of-the-way spot to get some 'real' writing done. But the world again distracts him, from his cloying girlfriend on the phone to the teenaged waitress playing the radio too loud, with whom he is first annoyed and then charmed. This character, Paola (Valeria Ciangottini), will be an important symbol of uncorrupted innocence later in the film. The café scene is really the sum of Marcello's life: the authentic choice to be a literary figure is in constant tension with the distractions of life, which are sometimes annoyances and more often temptations.

The movie continues in a similar vein, with opportunities for Marcello to get close to authentic relationships and experiences, only to be distracted again. Always, modern urban life looms in the background, with its inability to provide any clear directives and throwing Marcello, the individual, back on his own choices. He continually finds reasons to postpone making any real commitments or substantive decisions. Two incidents finally push him to the point where he does decide on his identity. First, an unexpected visit from his provincial father ends in disappointment. Marcello had hoped it would serve as an opportunity to re-establish their strained relationship, but when his father leaves town early after humiliating himself by overindulging, Marcello is further isolated, both from family ties and from his provincial past. The second incident, however, is by far the most significant. Steiner shoots himself and his two children, and the police allow Marcello into the horrific crime scene in hopes that, as a friend, he could provide

some insight into Steiner's actions. Marcello is at a loss. The one person that served as his role-model, the person who was the example of a meaningful alternative to his seedy journalism career, had been so thoroughly disenchanted with life that he could end it so abominably. The cold-hearted exploitation of Steiner's widow by Marcello's photojournalist colleagues completes a sense of utter meaninglessness that must be enveloping Marcello.

The final vignette of the movie reveals the person he becomes. He looks older and haggard, though it's not clear how much time has passed since Steiner's death. He is leading a debauched group of 'friends' as they break into the estate of an acquaintance to celebrate a divorce. Marcello, who had not in past scenes participated in the debauchery always surrounding him, is as drunk as any. Yet though he has resigned himself to become just as they are, he clearly holds them in contempt. The following exchange between one of the revelers and Marcello is telling.

Guest: Say, weren't you a writer once, a man of letters, am I right?
Marcello: I announce that I left literature and journalism. I'm a publicity agent. And with great satisfaction.
Guest: It's true that to survive one has to write anything, but this is pretty bleak.

The guest quotes a shamelessly exaggerated publicity piece that Marcello has written. Marcello enthusiastically replies that he would write that sort of thing for anyone, given the right amount of money. One of his clients adds fuel to the flame, by goading, 'Intellectual man, why don't you amuse us. I'll raise your salary.' Marcello's amusement takes the form of belittling everyone in the room, often very cruelly. He is particularly brutal with a young woman who has only recently come to Rome from the same small town that he is from, holding her particularly in contempt as a reminder of himself.

In the last scene, it is dawn. The revelers, winding down, head for the beach. The sea is a common symbol of nature in Fellini's films, uncorrupted and enduring, and serves as a refreshing contrast to the party scene. A decayed ray has been hauled in by local fishermen, its dead eye 'insists on looking', as Marcello points out, and it's very easy to think that this is offered as a metonymic illustration of Marcello himself (see Figure 7.2). As he staggers away, Paola, the young waitress from the café where he had tried to do some writing, notices him from across a small

Figure 7.2 Marcello on the beach, trying to understand Paola's words. (Riama-Pathe/The Kobal Collection)

channel. The symbol of purity, associated with the sea, is separated from him by an inlet. She gestures to him, tries to say something, but he cannot understand. He is figuratively and literally too far from her. She waves goodbye as he walks from the beach.

So what *does La Dolce Vita* teach us about authenticity, and how does it compare with Sartre's insights? I wish to make three general observations: first, this film demonstrates an overall failed attempt at the sort of authenticity described above, though Marcello is not without some success; second, it nevertheless strengthens Sartre's insights about the importance of honesty and action in finding authentic meaning; and third, the film demonstrates the fragility of the individual and the effect of social pressures in making authenticity possible, just as Antonioni's films demonstrated the limits to the freedom that we can realistically expect of persons.

The first and second points need to be made together. Earlier in this chapter, I concluded that the two essential elements in Sartre's philosophy are (a) avoiding bad faith, or being honest with yourself about

the possibilities and consequences of choice, and (b) living a life of action, where the identity you find meaningful is actualized in what you do, not just what you think. We see Marcello striving for authenticity on both counts. Unlike many of the characters that surround him, he doesn't usually let himself fall into the reified roles determined by social status. While many are content to play the part of the sycophant to celebrity and power, Marcello is always a bit above that crowd. We get the sense that, at least until Steiner's death, he is more than the tabloid journalist, and he knows that he is. As Sartre would say, he knows that he is not bound by this role and that he is free to be someone else. Certainly his discussion with Steiner bears this out. He knows what he can be. He chooses to be a literary author, and while he may let himself get briefly carried away in his pursuit of women or a celebrity scoop, he always seems to remain honest with himself about who he is and his responsibility in making his life. I will even argue that at the end of the film, when he has given up on his literary aspirations and wallows in the money and debauchery surrounding his publicity career, he still maintains an overall honesty with himself.

It is easy to think that his insistence on writing anything for money shows that he now denies who he really is, but I think it is more accurate to say that he has become a cynic and a defeatist, *not* someone in bad faith. Yes, he declares, 'I announce that I left literature and journalism. I'm a publicity agent. And with great satisfaction.' But the tone is condescending and rings false. Later, when his brutal teasing of a young woman lands him in a headlock by one of the more sober party guests, he explains, 'I wanted to give a thank-you speech to all my friends for the beautiful career they gave me.' The obvious sarcasm suggests anger and humiliation with himself, but Marcello is not in bad faith; he has just given up.

This is why I think it is right to follow Sartre in insisting that human beings have to define their lives in terms of what they have done, in the activities they have carried out. If authenticity simply means not being in bad faith, then Marcello at the end of the film would have to be authentic. Yet living the life you hate, even if you do so without lying to yourself, is clearly not authentic. Marcello has failed, but what he has failed at is actualizing the goals we know he has. In fact, this is an excellent example of Sartre's notion of despair: the realization that there is no other validation for what he is than what he does, and that he has failed to do what would constitute the life he once wanted. Ambitions alone won't give life meaning, only the actualization of those ambitions can ultimately satisfy.

Yet it's difficult to hate Marcello for being the person he eventually becomes. Fellini allows us to understand *why* he is what he is. As Rosenthal points out, Marcello, like many characters in Fellini's films, is alone.[21] None of his romantic interests provide anything more than temporary diversion, including his girlfriend Emma, who doesn't connect with him on any substantive level. His family, as we see in the scene with his father, is distant, as is the small town that he left behind to pursue a career in Rome. What Marcello desperately needs is someone to recognize him for his literary talents, and the one person who can do that (Steiner) only serves to completely dishearten him. As Sartre explains, being-with-others is an important part of securing a meaningful life, as other people can help 'see' what we do and give our actions concrete recognition. On one level, we can say that Steiner's suicide has left Marcello without important recognition of himself as a literary figure. But that doesn't explain why Marcello gives up. The explanation, I believe, lies in the fact that Marcello lost the only personal relationship that meant anything to him. Steiner was a friend and example; Marcello needed that relationship as much as, or more than, he needed the validation of his literary talents. Again, as we have seen in previous characters, Marcello's ability to muster the will to be authentic is largely impacted by the emotional and social resources available to him.

The film makes an important observation that I believe many of us can relate to: the circumstances of people's lives affect not just the range of choices available to them, but their very ability to choose. Marcello's desire to be a writer was difficult enough to realize before Steiner's suicide, but the loss of those important emotional and social resources made it far less likely that he could continue the effort of being authentic on the terms he had set out for himself. Similarly, many of us might be able to look back to a time in our own lives, or the lives of persons close to us, where success or failure to stand up for something meaningful but difficult was influenced by the support, or lack thereof, of family and friends. This is not quite the same point I made in connection with Antonioni's films; there I argued that the world might block the development of freedom. In this film, I suggest that even absent rigid or limiting social structures, persons often need support in their attempt to actualize their lives. This is an insight that goes beyond the account of authentic choosing that we get from Sartre. (That is no surprise for Sartre scholars, as Sartre's account of personal relationship is famously problematic.[22]) If authenticity is an important part of meaning, then a full account of authenticity, and meaning in general, will require more

consideration of this social component. In the final chapter, I'll return to this issue in a discussion of the importance of spiritual guides.

8½

While *La dolce vita* is partly autobiographical (like Marcello, Fellini did relocate to Rome from a small provincial town) *8½* goes much further in the direction of autobiography, to the point where it is difficult to know where the protagonist, Guido Anselmi (Marcello Mastroianni) ends and Fellini begins. Guido is a director, attempting to make a film amidst the chaos of the production process and his own personal life. He is unsure what the film is really about, just as Fellini was while making *8½*. He tries to make sense of his childhood memories, conveyed through flashbacks, and these are largely depictions of Fellini's own childhood. Guido even wears the same clothes Fellini wore at the time. Because this is a film largely by Fellini on Fellini, it obviously adds that element of personalism discussed above. Perhaps for that reason, the subjective style is greatly amplified in this movie. There are a good many episodes that are reconstructed memories, dreams, and imaginings. In the first viewing, it is sometimes difficult to know what is only imagined by Guido and what really happens. This all adds up to very concrete depictions of Guido's inner experience, one that will have an interesting effect on the analysis of authenticity.

The subjective emphasis is clear from the very first scene, a classic anxiety dream to which many of us can relate. Guido is alone in a car, packed so tightly with other vehicles in a traffic jam that there is no room to move. The car fills with smoke, and a trapped and very anxious Guido escapes by literally taking flight. Soaring briefly through the clouds, he realizes that there is a rope on his foot, and he is pulled into the sea by persons we will later recognize in the frenzy surrounding the film production. There is little need for deep dream analysis here: Guido feels trapped, threatened, and while he would like to escape, his responsibilities to others tether him firmly to his circumstances.

Guido wakes from his dream in a spa, where he has gone to convalesce from the anxiety we just saw expressed in the dream. One of the first scenes in the movie exemplifies Fellini's style and his ability to draw us into Guido's experience. Part of the treatment calls for drinking mineral water, and the scene takes in the scores of persons drinking or standing in line for their glass. As the shot begins, we hear an orchestra playing Wagner's 'The Ride of the Walkyres'. The camera is busy. It pans through the large outdoor resort structure, moving in and out

of close-ups of a variety of characters: monks, nuns, society women, elderly people wearing clothes from the 1930s. The pace of the camera movement (which opens with one long take) and the movement of the actors are in pace with the music, to the extent that at one point, as the queue for the water advances, everyone in line advances in step with the music and in step with one another. Occasionally actors in close-ups will look directly into the camera, toasting or smiling, suggesting that this is a point of view shot. The camera finally pans to the conductor and orchestra, somewhat surprisingly placing the music in the diegesis. We cut to Guido, but by the time we do, we do not need to read his face to get a sense of his impression of all this. The odd assortment of characters, the juxtaposition of the music with the visuals, the mild chaos of it all – this isn't an objective account of the typical spa experience, this is a subjective account of Guido's experience. It is spectacle, but one that serves to show what Guido makes of it all. We, and he, are amused and mildly delighted. And that is just the point of analyzing this scene: it demonstrates Fellini's ability to put the viewer in the perspective of the character. We will be seeing the world through his eyes in this movie.

Next is the first of many daydreaming sequences, introduced by a close-up of Guido with lowered head gazing over his glasses (see Figure 7.3). What he 'sees' is more in his imagination than his field of vision: a beautiful young woman with a ballet-like poise, smiling at Guido. Then gracefully, almost dancing, she approaches the mineral water supply and offers a glass to him, with an adoring and soulful expression in her eyes. Cut then to the reality: an ordinary, sweating woman impatiently handing him the water. The dream girl will appear often in the film, an ideal of femininity who adores him, in contrast to the actual women with whom he has complicated relationships. We will go in and out of these daydreams so much that the viewer is sometimes unsure what is dream and what is not, further planting us in Guido's perspective.

Guido, still at the spa, is approached by Daumier (Jean Rougeul), the intellectual writer and critic supposed to assist him in the script. As the two walk, we get a point-of-view tracking close-up of Daumier, again assigning the viewer Guido's perspective, as the critic chastises him about the script: 'On the first reading it's evident that the film lacks a problematic, or a philosophical premise... making the film a series of gratuitous episodes, perhaps amusing for their ambiguous realism. One wonders what the authors are trying to say. Are they trying to make us think? To scare us?'[23] Of course, Daumier is leveling a criticism not only

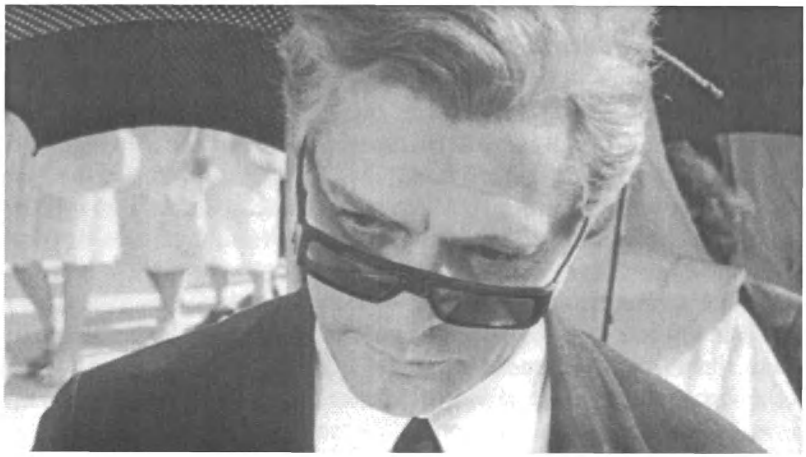

Figure 7.3 Guido's absent-minded gaze introduces a daydream sequence. (Cineriz/The Kobal Collection)

of Guido's film, but of *8½* itself. (It would apply equally well to the *La dolce vita*.) The frame changes effortlessly from the point-of-view to a two shot of Guido and Daumier by zooming out slightly and following Daumier as he joins Guido seated on a bench, where they continue their conversation. Fellini employs this technique in other places (e.g., when Marcello arrives at Steiner's cocktail party), and it nicely allows him to film an exchange between characters after first putting us firmly in the place of the protagonist. It is techniques like this, I believe, that makes the film so powerful in its ability to convey lived human experience. It is difficult not to sympathize with Guido over Daumier's criticism, and for that matter, with Fellini over the critical reaction he received for his previous film and can well expect from the current one.

When the spa scene later comes to a close, we hear more of Daumier's observations as a voice over, which bridges this scene to the next, where we find that Daumier's rant is a note that Guido is reading while waiting at a train station. He writes: 'And what is the meaning of the capricious apparitions of the girl in the spring? An offer of purity? Of warmth to the protagonist? Of all your story's overabundant symbols, this is the worst.' This reveals the earlier daydream as no idle fantasy; he was apparently trying out in imagination an element of the film. Guido is taking inspiration from his surroundings, the images and experiences that surround him. This will be a common vehicle throughout the film. Certain experiences trigger memories or fantasies, and we live out those

flights into imagination with Guido. They reveal who he is, but also show us the ideas or emotions he is trying to convey in making his film (which is also *this* film). At the same time, he is constantly aware that the particular expressions of his ideas will be subject to criticism, from the intellectual Daumier, whom we've already seen, to an assortment of persons that will be introduced later: producers and actors, church authorities, his wife, and his sister, to name just a few. Fellini shows us what Guido is trying to articulate in his film and why, while showing us his anxiety about not getting it right or disappointing his audience.

Two main sources of interest and anxiety are predominate in Guido's life: women and his film project. We'll examine his issues with women first.

Guido's relationships are dysfunctional. He has invited his mistress, Carla (Sandra Milo) to join him while away at the spa. Since he doesn't want to be caught with her, he hides her in a nearby hotel and escapes to her when he can. But in a phone conversation with his wife, Luisa (Anouk Aimée), he spontaneously decides to invite her to the spa as well. Inviting them both might seem remarkably ill-advised, but it makes sense when we understand how conflicted Guido is about women. In one memory scene, we find out that the young Guido and his friends would visit a local prostitute and pay for her to dance the rumba for them. Guido is discovered and punished by the clerical authorities, who condemned his interest in sexuality as shameful. An earlier memory has women doting on him and other young children in a rural cottage. We are offered these experiences as an explanation of why Guido has difficulty reconciling the role of women as objects of sexual attraction with women as nurturing, domestic partners. In one uncomfortable (and inevitable) moment, Guido and Luisa are at an outdoor café when Carla enters. Luisa obviously knows of Carla, and the exchange between husband and wife is just as you'd expect. Guido escapes into a fantasy where all the women in his life are gathered at the comfortable rural cottage from his childhood memory, doting and serving his every need. When they get out of line, he uses a whip to put them in their place, which they find sexually stimulating. This is Guido at his chauvinist worst, and contemporary audiences may find it difficult to find the intended humor. The angelic figure introduced in the mineral water scene is another sort of fantasy, one that he is attempting to manifest in his (Guido's) film. This one combines all of what he finds best of women in one character; and late in the film he will conclude that it is hopeless to articulate this synthesis. In fact *8½* never offers a resolution to his conflicts with women; it merely shows us that the

conflicts are part of who he is. As Peter Bondanella suggests, 'visualizing Guido's fantasies serves Fellini as a visualization of the *sources* of all artistic creativity'.[24]

But the real basis for Guido's anxiety is the pressure stemming from the production of his film. As the director, everything revolves around him. The producer constantly reminds him of the money already invested and expects results. Various actors want to know their role. Set designers want to know about the details of the large space ship that is half built and is somehow supposed to be central to the plot. One particularly famous scene takes place in the hotel lobby where the cast and crew are assembling. Guido is assailed by one person after another, everyone wanting special favors or attention. He and the camera move in a carefully choreographed dance, the camera usually over his back as it pans and zooms from one person to the next. We again share Guido's perspective, something like a mouse batted about by cats.

There are similar scenes throughout the movie. Everyone wants Guido to take a stand, to choose. But Guido is evasive throughout. He finds none of his alternatives satisfying, no particular plot resolution or character role seems to capture what he is after, so he avoids and postpones these decisions. He is as indecisive inwardly as he is outwardly. Retiring after a stressful day dodging the crowd, re-reflects: 'A crisis of inspiration? And what if it weren't a passing one, my dear? What if it's the final collapse of a filthy liar with no flair or talent?' He addresses himself to the vision of the ideal woman, who is folding back his sheets to tuck him in. 'Let's say you are purity itself. But what the hell does it mean to be really honest? Didn't you hear what the Falcaccio said? "It's time to set all the symbols aside, the echoing of purity, innocence, escape." What is it you want then?'

No one seems satisfied with a film where things are confused or unresolved, however. At one point the producer exclaims, 'You know, I've figured out what you're trying to talk about... Man's inner confusion. But you've got to be clearer. You have to make yourself understood. Otherwise what's the use of it?' These are the criticisms that Daumier makes as well. Guido feels expected to make a film that can be nicely summarized, identified as belonging to a specific ideology or making a particular statement. He himself is originally motivated by that expectation. As he explains to his sister, 'I thought my ideas were so clear... I thought I had something so simple to say. Something useful to everybody.'

At the end of the film, the producer decides to move things forward by holding a press conference at which Guido will be forced to answer questions and publically make the choices he has been avoiding. He

must be literally dragged to the event. The barrage of questions, all of which are designed to categorize him and his film, produce such anxiety that in a fantasy, he ducks under the table and shoots himself. In reality, he decides to cancel the film. Rather than choose among unacceptable alternatives, he would rather do nothing at all. Here the film becomes intensely self conscious. Daumier applauds Guido's decision, observing that the film was heading in the wrong direction, and of course the film Daumier describes is *8½*: 'Such a monstrous presumption to think that others could benefit from the squalid catalogue of our mistakes! And how do you benefit from stringing together that tattered pieces of your life? Your vague memories, the faces of people that you were never able to love...' Guido, however, is liberated. While he is relieved at canceling the film, he has decided that he can affirm his contradictions and confusions as being who he is, without having to justify them in terms of an ideology. In an imaginative address to his wife, who has decided to leave him, he admits his confusion. 'But this confusion is... me. Not as I'd like to be, but as I am. I'm not afraid anymore of telling the truth... This is the only way I can feel alive, and I can look into your faithful eyes without shame. Life is a celebration. Let's live it together!' As Bondanella observes, this juxtaposition of Daumier's criticism and Guido's affirmation is precisely the point. 'The domain of the irrational is, for Fellini, the ultimate source of artistic inspiration and creativity.' Instead of articulating a response to Daumier, 'He merely juxtaposes Daumier's arguments in the present, everyday working world of Guido Anselmi to visually stunning (and therefore artistic, but not logical) responses to Daumier's criticism.'[25]

In the final scene, Guido orchestrates the entire cast of his life, *and* the crew of *8½*, as they dance in a circle, circus-like, on the otherwise deserted set of the canceled film. They all join hands, cooperating in this tribute to Guido, and the schoolboy version of Guido marches in the middle. At least in his mind, Guido has learned to accept these usually competing characters and influences, and despite his failure as a film director, the film ends on an upbeat, if surreal, note.

In many ways *8½* reveals important insights into the concept of authenticity. Let's examine Guido from the perspective of the two characteristics of Sartrean authenticity discussed earlier: honesty and accomplishment. While *La dolce vita*'s Marcello may have been honest with himself at a deep level, he avoided making a committed choice through distractions and some rationalizations. Guido fares much better on this front. Certainly, he may be guilty of similar distractions, as when he invites his mistress to the location of the film production as a

divergence from the pressures of his work, but he is never very far from a realization that his choices are significant and they are his responsibility. In fact, Guido's circumstances makes for the ideal example of Sartrean anguish – the anxiety surrounding our acute consciousness of how responsible we are for our actions. True, Guido is rather forced into this condition in a way that Marcello is not; everyone demands, hourly, that Guido makes choices. Nevertheless, he is authentic in the sense that he takes personally these choices and does not deny their weight. He will not choose frivolously, because he knows that he is in a position where the resulting artistic endeavor will bear meanings and interpretations. Being honest with himself is the one constant in all the defenses of his indecision.

But in addition to being honest, we also said that authentic persons realize their choices through accomplishment, that is, by bringing actions into the world that reflect their chosen values. It is not enough to endorse a political position, for example, if you are not willing to support it through your actions. Such lip service is inauthentic. One might argue that Guido's inability to decide makes him inauthentic. He is powerless to carry through on his ambitions to make a film. Does the fact that his only action is purely a negative one – the decision not to decide – make him inauthentic?

I think not, though ultimately we must judge based on how we read his intentions. If Guido simply wanted to avoid the perils of making the wrong decision, if he did not want to commit to something because he was afraid of failure, then he is what Sartre calls a quietist. He would have failed to engage himself and thus would fail to be authentic the same way Marcello fails to pursue meaningful goals. But there is an important difference between Guido and Marcello. Marcello finally does something, but it's the wrong thing. He knew all along that tabloid journalism and the shallow business surrounding celebrity attention is meaningless for him, yet he chooses that path as a result of his disillusionments. While he might have stayed true to his original values and pursued a literary career, he instead chose the way that was easy, comfortable, and empty. Guido, on the other hand, has no agreeable options available to him. Through lack of creative inspiration, or whatever the reason, he could not find a way to make his film in a meaningful way. Agreeing to the demands to choose in order to appease others would have been the comfortable way out, but Guido decides to abandon the project altogether rather than take that road. This makes his decision an authentic one. He would rather do nothing than do something that would be dishonest or betray his sense of what is meaningful. In that

sense, this *is* a positive action. By refusing to project an image that seems wrong, he at least does no harm. Sometimes, when our options are limited, it may well be best not to choose any of them than to champion a blatantly wrong cause. This insight surely ought to be considered when we insist that authentic persons must actualize their choices.

There is one other aspect to this film that should be addressed in understanding authenticity: the self-reflexive, autobiographical nature of the film. While Marcello does not make his film, Fellini does make his. Guido is happy to dump the film and affirm the irrational, irreconcilable aspects of his thinking. But *Fellini* makes a film that succeeds precisely because it affirms Guido's contradictions. Fellini is showing us how complicated living can be, without trying to tie it up neatly with pat answers or labels. The movie (*8½*) is one that he may well have feared would be subject to the sorts of criticisms he let Daumier articulate about Guido's film, but he makes a film that affirms the artistic endeavor in the face of those criticisms. Judging this work of art as the product of an authentic attitude, it satisfies both of our requirements: it is honest, and it affirms and realizes the artist's conviction. This isn't to say that the other films discussed in this book are any less authentic achievements, but those films do not directly call attention to the filmmaker the way this film does. The obvious similarities between Fellini and Guido make us conscious of the fact that Guido's attitudes toward making a movie are the same as Fellini's. That gives the film an added weight when we consider how it teaches us something about the human condition, because the movie portrays not just the courageousness of the fictitious Guido but that of the flesh-and-blood Fellini.

Conclusion

Fellini's films simultaneously strengthen and go beyond the understanding of authenticity that we get from existentialist philosophers like Heidegger and Sartre. The Sartrean notion of authenticity calls for (a) an honest recognition of the human situation as defined by our actions, yet subject to free re-evaluation (the opposite of bad faith), and (b) a life of action, whereby we realize the meaningful identity that we have chosen for ourselves.

La dolce vita demonstrates how important both of these elements are. Marcello never lets himself completely sink into bad faith. He never seems phony or shallow in the way that many of the other characters that inhabit his world do. Yet that does not save him from inauthenticity, because he fails to make the hard decisions and sacrifices necessary

to realize the ambitions that are meaningful to him. Fellini's subjective film style allows us to understand this character, though, and his failure is one we can sympathize with, if not condone. Once again, the insights of the film give us reason to back away some from the radical freedom of Sartre. Marcello's lack of personally meaningful relationships and Steiner's tragic end are clearly formative influences on Marcello's character. Marcello's fate may be mostly his responsibility, but the social resources one does or does not have clearly makes a difference in the pursuit of authenticity.

It may seem odd to claim that Guido is authentic when he fails to actualize the project that seems to shape this part of his life, but as we get to know Guido, it becomes clear that he is not just about making a film, but making one that has some artistic merit. His insistence on being honest and the unwillingness to commit to ideas that don't ring true to him, no matter how hard pressed he is by others, are the grounds of his authenticity. More than that, *8½* itself can be read as an authentic achievement by Fellini as an artist, since the film is itself an affirmation of his views. Reflections on this film help to further clarify the second criterion for authenticity: the fact that we must actualize and live out our chosen values. Actualizing choices should not be understood narrowly as producing achievements or becoming a success in your chosen endeavor, particularly when our sense of 'success' and 'achievement' are in large part socially constructed concepts which may not reflect one's own choices. Rather, we should think of this criterion as a willingness and commitment to 'make good' on our most fundamental choices. Guido and Fellini both desire to make an honest piece of art. Only Fellini has an actual achievement to show for his efforts, but both make good on their commitment to create only that which is in some way true to their worldview. What we see in Guido, and what we don't see in Marcello, is that *attitude* toward life which enables him to sacrifice for his priorities and draw lines where necessary, even if he is often confused about exactly what his priorities are. Identifying authenticity as just such an attitude has been my goal throughout this chapter. Authenticity is not about *what* you do, it's about *how* you do it.

8

The Nietzschean Free Spirit in *Dead Poets Society* and *Harold and Maude*

The various films discussed in the preceding chapters demonstrate existentialist concepts in ways that show both what the existentialists get right about their description of the human condition and what they have missed or failed to take fully into account. What they seem to have missed most is the impact of the social world and life circumstances on the emergence of a free, authentic self. This is a criticism of existentialism in general that has occurred frequently in theoretical literature, though usually the outcome of those critiques is to set aside existentialism in favor of a different approach altogether.[1] I have attempted to show that there remains something vital and compelling about concepts such as freedom, bad faith, authenticity, and the like despite the fact that achieving the ideal existentialist perspective may be more complicated by social context than some of the existentialist writers are willing to admit. For this final analysis of film and existentialism, I will turn to Nietzsche's concept of the free spirit, because it offers a perspective on freedom that *does* acknowledge the limitations discussed in preceding chapters while still advocating a form of freedom that is substantive and likely to be the source of meaning in a world of contingent values.

The two films discussed in this chapter, Peter Weir's *Dead Poets Society* (1989) and Hal Ashby's *Harold and Maude* (1971), demonstrate the Nietzschean free spirit as well as anyone could ask, and do so with a blend of gravity and light-heartedness appropriate to a discussion of Nietzsche's views on freedom and creativity. They also make a point that Nietzsche himself underappreciated: free spirits have a far better chance of developing their freedom if nurtured by guides or mentors,

showing that even with Nietzsche's rugged individualism, the existentialist pursuit of meaning is largely a social affair.

Nietzsche's free spirit

Writing about Nietzsche is always a bit dangerous, as he is decidedly not a systematic writer. That is, he does not develop a measured and integrated exposition of mutually-relating concepts the way, say, Spinoza, Hegel, or even Sartre might. Nietzsche writes a series of short observations on a host of topics, often with aphorisms, poetic metaphors, and indirect and subtle references that span the entire history of Western philosophy and literature. Finding a big picture is difficult, and to generalize about what Nietzsche believed invites controversy and likely disagreement among scholars. Still, his insights are too important and too pertinent to the issues discussed here to shy away from them. Besides, once you get the hang of reading Nietzsche, few philosophers are as entertaining to read and discuss, whether you agree with his views or not.

In attempting to capture what I think is most important about Nietzsche's view of freedom for the discussion of existentialist topics developed throughout this book, I will focus on his early to middle works, specifically, from *Human, All Too Human* (1878, Vol. 1) to the *Gay Science* (1882). Part of the reason for this is because these works are less fettered by the controversy surrounding some of the (arguably) metaphysical assumptions about the eternal recurrence and the will to power, but the other reason is because in these works Nietzsche is thoroughly opposed to a metaphysical free will *while celebrating* the free spirit. That is important, because the lesson learned from films like *L'eclisse* and *La dolce vita*, I have been arguing, is that that freedom is not an inherent capacity but the end of a process of development. Nietzsche's freedom is interesting because he thinks that natural and social forces largely determine our character, yet he thinks a certain sense of freedom is nevertheless a real possibility. Throughout *Human, All Too Human*, for example, Nietzsche clearly embraces determinism, but at the same time, the book is subtitled *A Book for Free Spirits*. And the back cover of *The Gay Science* as it was originally published reads: 'This book marks the conclusion of a series of writings by Friedrich Nietzsche whose common goal is to erect *a new image and ideal of the free spirit*'.[2] The first task, then, is to understand how Nietzsche thinks we are free, given that he also thinks we are at least shaped, and perhaps determined, by past causes. But it is also important to see how Nietzsche shares the views of the twentieth century existentialists on the nature of choice, and in comparing these different lines of thought it becomes

clear that the central element in being free lies in the acknowledgement of the contingency of values and the extent to which their legitimacy relies on *our* decision to affirm them, which does not at all require that we assume a causally independent faculty called 'free will'.

I will begin with a look at the nature of his determinism. In this early/middle stage of Nietzsche's writing, his tendency is to take as a starting point the achievements of natural science, most notably Darwinism, and to draw the consequences for these new understandings for our body of beliefs and values, thus distancing himself from the romanticism of his contemporaries and his own previous works.[3] His determinism in this period is typical of the enlightenment era account of cause and effect, in which every event is the result of specific causes, and human beings cannot do otherwise than what they have done: 'if one were all-knowing, one would be able to calculate every individual action.'[4] However, as his writing matures, Nietzsche's view on a will that is a cause among causes is complicated by his changing view of the self, which he sees as a complicated process of competing drives and not a unified entity.[5] 'Necessity is not a fact but an interpretation ... When one has grasped that the "subject" is not something that creates effects, but only a fiction, much follows.'[6] In other words, Nietzsche came to think that we are constituted of processes too complicated to be conveyed in the overly simplistic talk of cause and effect, which is inherited from a very mechanistic view of the world.

The bottom line is that Nietzsche does not allow us to have any special causal effects on the world simply because we are human beings. We are part of the natural world and subject to its constraints just as anything else is; we are not 'the eternal *miracle worker* ... the astonishing exception, the superbeast and almost-god' which would be required to explain a metaphysical capacity for free will; and that means the physical world, which includes genetics, psychology, and social interactions, is capable of causing us to be and think a certain way.[7] We are products of our history. And precisely because of this, attaining any sense of freedom will not come easily. Certain difficult lessons must be learned.

First, one must understand the nature of truth, because it is in the name of truth that we are asked to follow certain principles and goals. For example, a philosopher like Kant would have us obey moral principles because they are inherently reasonable and true. But Nietzsche thinks that this is a convenient and naïve understanding of what human beings are and what they are capable of. We are natural, organic beings, determined by a variety of causes, and our thinking has more to do with survival and flourishing than with truth. Untruth, in fact, can be more useful for survival than the truth, as explained in Chapter 1. 'Thus the *strength* of knowledge does not depend on its degree of truth

but on its age, on the degree to which it has been incorporated, on its character as a condition of life.'[8]

What we believe, Nietzsche is saying, has less to do with a correspondence to the world outside of us and more to do with conditions of survival. Our beliefs engender certainty because they have proven useful, and when they concern social values, their usefulness is determined by cultural authorities. Socialization has instilled in us a moral compass that we take for true, but which is revealed as the cultural creation it is once we begin to look under the surface. The first step in being free, then, is to become conscious of this. Reasoning that tries to establish the Truth, particularly with respect to morality, is always suspect. At the moment when we become aware of this fact, we become freed from the perspective of values and beliefs as absolutes – as True. In seeing where values arise, we also see them for what the cultural constructs they are and are granted the opportunity to revise them. In sum, truths are only true with a small 't'.[9] They are a product of our cultural history; and as such are merely contingent. In this way, Nietzsche places the human condition in the same camp with Sartre, Heidegger, and most other existentialists: human beings are cut off from absolutes and those who understand this find the weight of justification thrown back on their own shoulders. Values originate with us, not from without.

Nietzsche's freedom is based on our ability to attain a certain perspective, then, and not some special metaphysical power. Furthermore, one cannot simply choose to have this perspective; it requires a difficult process of development. In one of Zarathustra's first speeches, Nietzsche provides metaphors for the life of the free spirit.[10] It consists of three stages – a camel, lion, and child – and these symbolize the kinds of development needed for one to become free in Nietzsche's sense of that word. First, as camel, the developing individual gathers and bears knowledge. That is, one must have the patience and endurance to undergo a complete education, to become familiar with the nature and history of one's culture and its alternatives. As lion, one must then be willing to subject one's cultural conditioning to a reevaluation, critiquing according to our now informed sensibilities. Finally, for those fully liberated individuals, one ought not exhaust oneself in critique only, but do something creatively to add to the development of cultural values; hence, the child: enthusiasm, a new beginning, creativity.

Something like this is repeated throughout Nietzsche's works: the need for knowledge and comprehension, the ability to critique, and the power of creation are necessary aspects of the free spirit. The

defining element for freedom, however, seems to be the second of these: the ability to stand over and against the values and beliefs of one's upbringing and reevaluate them. Certainly an education is necessary for this, as one has to understand the historical influences that produce our current worldview, but education is not sufficient for producing freethinking. After all, educated persons can be unthinking dogmatists as well as constructive critics, simply because they wish to avoid the discomfort or alienation of going against convention. The most important element in being free, then, is to confront our cultural traditions honestly, to look our traditions in the eye and critique them, using rationality as a resource for overcoming what no longer may be personally or culturally productive. 'He is called a free spirit who thinks differently from what, on the basis of his origin, environment, his class and profession, or on the basis of the dominant views of his age, would have been expected of him.'[11] And the free spirit does so because it does not feel the need to acquiesce to the status quo; it finds such distance from tradition an empowering liberation. 'A drive and impulse rules and masters it like a command... "Better to die than to go on living *here*" – thus responds the imperious voice and temptation: and this "here," this "at home" is everything it had hitherto loved!'[12]

Putting these points together, we can see what is distinctive about the Nietzschean concept of the free spirit as an existentialist perspective. First, those who Nietzsche calls 'free' are not so in any special metaphysical sense. As a philosopher grounded in some form of determinism, he is quick to acknowledge that social and physical forces contribute to the creation of herd and free spirit alike. Second, the free spirit recognizes that despite the need many feel for certainty in matters of truth and values, we have none. Third, individuals become free by exposing their social customs for just that, customs, which may or may not be rational or appropriate for ourselves and our world; and the free person is then capable of critiquing them and subsequently either endorsing or abandoning them (a 'reevaluation of values'). Fourth, those unfettered from the obligation to conform to the herd's beliefs now find a sense of liberation in distancing themselves from the norms they were once at home in. (This is the process of 'self-overcoming' discussed in Chapter 1.) Finally, free spirits must be willing to affirm their lives and their chosen values. That is, the pursuit of freedom is empowering, despite, or perhaps due to, the obstacles involved in overcoming social conventions. In sum, free spirits, having understood the contingency of values, become the main causal force in their own

life, and they therefore look upon the plasticity of value and truth as opportunity, not as loss.

> Once a human being reaches the fundamental conviction that he *must* be commanded, he becomes 'a believer'. Conversely, one could conceive of such a pleasure and power of self-determination, such a *freedom* of the will that the spirit would take leave of all faith and every wish for certainty, being practiced in maintaining himself on insubstantial ropes and possibilities and dancing even near abysses. Such a spirit would be the *free spirit* par excellence.[13]

This is the attitude that the protagonists in Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors* and *Match Point* miss. They think of value as originating in an external foundation, and the lack of one proves a threat to meaning and a nihilistic abandonment of any moral bearing, allowing for the possibility of even murder. To see examples of characters that convey the life-affirming attitude of Nietzsche's free spirit, we'll need to look at different sorts of films.

Dead Poets Society

The two movies discussed in this chapter have been chosen for their depiction of a character which aptly exemplifies Nietzsche's free spirit. Robin Williams, in *Dead Poets Society*, and Ruth Gordon, in *Harold and Maude*, give performances that manifest the inner strength and contagious vitality of the free spirit, while the surrounding characters serve to show how influential – or threatening – such personalities can be. Much like the role of imagery in the films of Antonioni and Fellini, the performance of an actor is a characteristic that cannot be adequately conveyed in a written description. Anyone who has had the sort of person portrayed in this movie impact their lives will relate instantly to the characterization found in these films. The films are made more effective by the filmmakers' ability to convey the impact of free-spirited individuals on those around them.

Dead Poets Society (directed by Peter Weir and written by Tom Schulman) centers on a group of students at an exclusive boys-only preparatory school in the late 1950s. It follows their friendships and adventures from the beginning of the school year, as they form relationships with one another and with the faculty. Particularly influential is the new English teacher, John Keating (Robin Williams), an alumnus of the school and an ivy-league graduate. Keating does what all good teachers

do: he conveys not just the knowledge of the subject matter to the students but his passion for it as well. Yet Keating does more. He tries to open his students to ways of thinking and living that will elevate them to something unique and extraordinary, and his success empowers the boys while, for that very reason, threatening the administration's sense of duty to the parents and community.

Keating sets the tone from his first moment in the classroom. Entering from his adjoining office in the back of the room, he strolls through the classroom to the hall door, whistling to himself, then beckons the class to follow him. In the hall outside, amidst the glass display cases that house the trophies and pictures of past students in the school's 100-year history, Keating's first words to the students are 'O Captain! My Captain!' from the Walt Whitman poem about Abraham Lincoln. Most will address him as 'Captain' for the rest of the film. After some humor (Robin-Williams style, though convincingly adapted to the setting and era) and poetry, Keating gets to the first lesson, which will remain his main message throughout all his interactions with the students: *carpe diem*, 'seize the day'. Do not wait to make something of yourselves, but actualize your ambitions. 'We are food for worms', he warns, as he has them look at the pictures of long dead previous students.[14] Their predecessors were also once young and thought themselves immortal, but their fates are sealed, their accomplishments are realized or not, according to how they lived. Keating has them lean in to listen to their message, as he whispers: '*Carpe diem*. Seize the day. Make your life extraordinary.'

The framing and camera movement help establish the relationship between students and teacher. As the students try to figure out Keating, we get brief close-ups of various expressions, ranging from skepticism to amusement to curiosity. Near the end of the scene, while the students look at photos of their past classmates, we get a shot of them from the front. The boys are now interested in Keating's words, and the camera tracks past their faces, revealing their intense gaze, but also keeping Keating in the frame as he walks behind them. This combination of close-ups with careful positioning of Keating and his students is common throughout the film, and it allows the viewer to share the students' experience.

While the boys are initially unsure of what to think of this unorthodox teacher, they quickly warm to him, both due to his infectious enthusiasm and his willingness to defy the stale social customs that attend the boys' strict, moneyed families. (It is worth noting that 'Tradition' is one of the school's ideological pillars.) The best scenes are the various

classroom lessons reoccurring throughout the film. For example, he has them tear out the introduction to their poetry text, because it asks the students to graphically quantify a poem's greatness. 'Keep ripping gentlemen', he encourages. 'This is a battle, a war, and the casualties could be your hearts and souls. ... In my class you will learn to think for yourselves again.' Most of the students initially have difficulty with this blatant indiscretion, and a colleague passing in the hall bursts in assuming an unattended classroom and bad behavior. But Keating isn't frivolous. In a later classroom scene, he explains, 'We don't read and write poetry because it's cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race, and the human race is filled with passion.' Quoting more Whitman, he adds 'the power play goes on and you may contribute a verse. What will your verse be?' This scene begins with a medium long shot of Keating viewed between two aisles of students (see Figure 8.1). As the dialogue intensifies, he invites the students to huddle around him. The camera is effectively part of the huddle, drawing the viewer into the exchange as one of the students. As Keating delivers his Whitman lines, the camera comes in for a close-up of Keating, then a series of close-ups of different students, now enraptured. Again, we are drawn into the exchange and are able to appreciate the power of the lesson.

Figure 8.1 Students and camera huddle around Keating. (Touchstone/The Kobal Collection/Duhamel, Francois)

Keating isn't just teaching poetry, in his own words, he's teaching students to think for themselves, but this doesn't go over well with the established teachers and administrators. That means lessons in resisting conformity and social expectations. In one lesson, he stands on his desk and looks out at the classroom from his elevated view, 'to remind myself that we must constantly look at things in a different way' (see Figure 8.2). He then has all the students take turns climbing the desk. Point-of-view shots from high and low angle invite the viewer to partake of the lesson. In another scene, he asks three students to march around the school courtyard, pointing out that though they began with their own strides, they soon began marching in step. He then sets them to milling about consciously trying to find their own walk. 'You must trust that your beliefs are unique, your own, even though others might think them odd or unpopular. Even though the herd may go "that's baaaaad".'

Keating's teaching gets results. Students who would not have taken poetry seriously begin to do so, but they also begin to emerge as individuals. In perhaps the most intense classroom scene besides the one that closes the movie, Keating makes one shy student, Todd Anderson (Ethan Hawke), recite a poem he was to have written for class that day. Todd, a bright student but terrified of public speaking, claims not to have written anything. Keating writes a quote from Whitman on the board, 'I sound my barbaric yawp over the rooftops of the world', and proceeds to make Todd 'yawp' until embarrassment gives way to frustration, which Keating immediately directs at a portrait of Whitman. Keating goads Todd into improvised descriptions of the poet, though the persistent coaching is always humorous and good-natured. Here again, the camera helps convey the impact of teacher on pupil and Todd's self discovery. Keating circles Todd, coaching and prodding, and the camera circles the pair. As Todd engages the poetry, the camera moves faster, blurring the rest of the students and the classroom, keeping only Keating and Todd in focus, and visually conveying Todd's ability to reach the poetry through his fear of public speaking. Before he realizes it, he has improvised a bit of verse far superior to those his classmates had prepared, to the applause of the class. A close-up of Keating hearing the words reveals his pride at the student's accomplishment, reminding us that this is a mutual accomplishment.

Much of the students' real growth takes place outside the classroom, though even there it is due largely to Keating's influence. The boys' fascination with their English teacher leads them to dig up an old

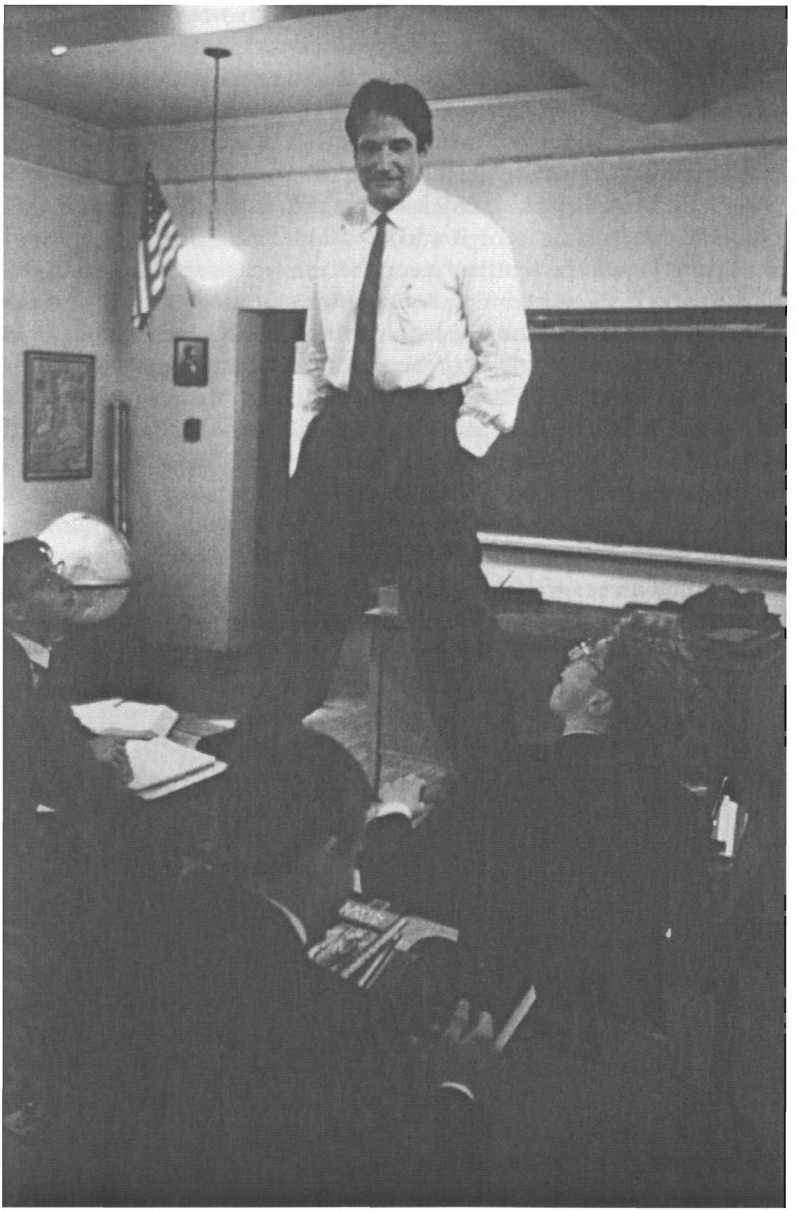

Figure 8.2 Keating encourages his students to look at things from a different perspective. (Touchstone/The Kobal Collection)

annual, where Keating is listed as a member of the Dead Poets Society. Intrigued, they ask him about it, and he explains it was a group of students who gathered in a nearby cave and shared their passion for poetry and creative expression. 'The Dead Poets were dedicated to sucking the marrow out of life', he explains, referencing Thoreau's *Walden*. Though Keating does not explicitly urge the boys to restart the society, they do. Throughout most of the rest of the film, they will regularly meet in the cave (off school grounds and in violation of the rules), and to this meeting they will bring instruments, pictures of pin-up girls, ghost stories, ceramic lamps rescued from the junk, and poetry. It becomes a forum for individual creative expression and a place for the group to bond. They offer each other encouragement, always emphasized by their motto, *carpe diem*, and as a result, they pursue goals they would not have dared before, from girls to practical jokes against the administration.

One particular student's tragic plight brings the free-thinking cult of Keating into conflict with the school authorities. Neil Perry (Robert Sean Leonard) is a popular student leader and self-assured around the other boys, but he is helpless in the presence of his unreasonably strict father, who will brook no deviation from the plans he has for his son's future. Mr. Perry (Kurtwood Smith) insists that Neil limits extracurricular activities, but Neil has fallen in love with acting and won the part of Puck in a local production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. 'For the first time in my life, I know what I want to do', he explains to his roommate Todd. But when Neil's father finds out the night before the plays is to be performed, he insists that Neil quit the play as punishment for having disobeyed. Neil, unable to directly confront his father on the issue but unwilling to give up his dream, promises to quit but goes through with the performance anyhow. An enraged father pulls him from school that same night, and announces that Neil will be enrolled in a military academy. Emotionally shattered, Neil kills himself with his father's revolver.

This is the beginning of the end. The grief-stricken parents blame Keating, who has already been chastised by the administration for his unconventional teaching. The school's reputation is at stake, and Keating becomes the scapegoat for Neil's suicide. The Dead Poets Society becomes the center of the controversy, and Keating is accused of encouraging the students' disobedience. Most of the students in the club are coerced into signing a letter formally putting the blame on Keating, who is subsequently dismissed. In the final scene, Keating's poetry class is being temporarily taught by the school's director Mr. Nolan (Norman Lloyd), who decides to begin the class anew by reading the

textbook introduction, only to find that Keating had them rip it out. Already addled by this, he is further aggravated by Keating appearing at the door to pick up his personal belongings. It's a tense moment; Nolan's hostility is compounded by the students' shame and sorrow for their forced betrayal. As Keating leaves, Todd blurts out an apology but is quickly silenced by Nolan. But in a last show of solidarity with their exiled mentor, Todd stands on his desk and addresses Keating: 'O Captain! My Captain!' Despite Nolan's threats of expulsion, one by one half the members of the class follows Todd's lead and stand on their desk in a final salute. The other students bury their faces in their hands. The camera shot is angled from below, so that standing students seem to tower over the classroom. Keating, in a high angle point-of-view shot from the student's perspective, delivers the final line of the movie: 'thank you, boys'.

Keating, of course, exemplifies Nietzsche's free spirit. Once a student at the school himself, Keating's contrast to the students in terms of self assurance and intellectual perspective shows how far he has developed. He might have become the sort of average, career teacher that the rest of the faculty aspire to, but his passion for the intellectual journey that he shares with his students suggests a different motivation. In his hands, figures like Whitman and Thoreau offer depths of experience and ways of viewing life that liberate the pupil. One thinks of the metaphors of height and distance common in Nietzsche's description of the noble type that are also a visual motif in the film. The willingness to confront the school's (and society's) stale traditions stems from this aspiration to reach such heights and not, as the school administrators assume, from some purely anti-authoritarian or mischievous intent. Finally, Keating represents the creative, life-affirming attitude that Nietzsche describes with his metaphor of the child: 'innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred "Yes".'[15]

But beyond the dialogue, it is the portrayal of Robin Williams that really clinches the case for Keating as an example of the free spirit. We expect this sort of personality to laugh but also to be knowing, not bent by the spirit of seriousness, yet not the nihilist who would put no stock in any value for long. The free spirit must be self *affirming*. And that blend is exactly what Williams delivers. His sense of humor and enthusiasm pervade the character, though he is rarely the clown. He brings out the meaningful core which drives Keating's self-assuredness and willingness to make sacrifices (which includes, ultimately, his teaching position). Williams' ability to improvise, itself an extraordinarily

creative characteristic of the actor, is infused with the character of Keating to bring out the connection between independence and creativity. One sees clearly the link between this freedom from convention and the creativity of the free spirit, and for those of us who have met someone similar to Keating, that blend will be familiar. Free spirits may be cynical at times but are not cynics. They may be clownish at times but also exude a seriousness rooted in a meaningful perspective.

The students also illustrate the development of the free spirit. As indicated so often above, the free spirit is arrived at through a process of development and is not the result of some intrinsic quality of humanity (like a 'free will'). The students are just beginning to enter adulthood, and one can see in them the makings of various sorts of adults. For some, the opportunity to adopt a freer perspective is their first encounter with something of real significance and meaning. One student goes so far as to play practical jokes that earn him vicious corporal punishment and near expulsion, driven mostly by his own sense of independence from the school whose authority he had hitherto taken for granted. This is an immature sort of recklessness that even Keating admonishes, with the memorable advice, 'Sucking all the marrow out of life doesn't mean choking on the bone'. But the attitude of independence is there, misdirected as it may be. These sorts of students have the promise to be free spirits, though anything may yet happen to 17-year-olds which could lead them astray. In fact, it seems likely that freedom will not germinate in all of them. One student is quick to sell out the rest of the society in order to avoid negative consequences. He never quite connects with the independent perspective that other students find so meaningful. We imagine that he will likely remain, and perhaps excel as, part of the herd. In any event, the movie portrays the free spirit from two sides: in Keating, the developed free spirit, and in at least some of his students, the emerging free spirits.

Like most of the films discussed in this book, *Dead Poets Society* also demonstrates that the process of becoming a free spirit is a very social affair. This is not necessarily an objection to Nietzsche, however, who fully acknowledges the causal factors that go into the development of any character. Still, films like these bring out some of the unique aspects of social interactions that will likely ring true for contemporary viewers, manifested in contexts that Nietzsche would have been unaware of.

To begin with, one sees how the development of free spirits is often thwarted, sometimes very consciously, by representatives of a status quo which has something to lose by allowing for critical attitudes. The reaction of Neil's father to his acting and the backlash visited to

the members of the Dead Poets Society after Neil's suicide are the most obvious examples. In these cases, the power in established institutions is mobilized, and its existence is no small curb on the development of the free spirit. Nietzsche well realized how much power the herd possessed to level values and prohibit creativity.[16] But this film places the conflict in education and family systems that most contemporary viewers can relate to, even if the period depicted is already several decades past. The film also shows the troubling effect of this sort of institutional resistance. Specifically, Keating loses his job, and there is a good chance that one or more students will face harsh penalties or expulsion. But the fact that the students could be cowed into betraying Keating shows that the real damage has less to do with the student's academic future than with their ability to think. One worries that they might become leveled, too fearful to assert their individuality in the future. That is why the final scene of the students standing on their desktops is so powerful. It's not just that they were willing to reach out to Keating, but that Keating's influence on some of them was not overturned by the attempt of parents and administrators to keep them in line.

Keating's influence suggests that the development of the free spirit is largely social. Keating is a mentor, to be sure, but a mentor for life itself, not just for poetry. His repeated entreaties to make something extraordinary of life, his undaunted enthusiasm, and in general, his attitude have a transforming affect on the students. Some of them, one feels, would never have deviated from 'the five public opinions' that Nietzsche referred to if not for Keating's influence. In that way he is not only a free spirit, but a guide for others to become free spirits as well. Many of us can look back to a person who is formative – or transformative – in our lives. Such individuals need not be educators, though often educators are in a position to introduce ideas and ways of looking at the world that would be unwelcome in other circumstances. These guides make it possible for individuals to develop their freedom; and it may very well be that some persons never take the first steps down the path of that development for lack of just such a guide, though this obviously varies with personalities and situations. In some cases, guides may do little more than give the necessary encouragement to a person who is ready to set off in some new, authentic direction; these persons probably would likely have found a catalyst someplace, and the guide simply provides the opportunity to take the first steps. In *Dead Poets Society*, one gets the impression that Neil, who had already developed a role of leadership and independence among his peers, would

eventually have begun to resist his father's unreasonably harsh control over his future whether or not he had encountered Keating. Keating merely gives the final shove, and the tragic result is more due to the various characters' reactions to events than to Neil's independence. Yet there are other cases in which guides provide crucial elements in a person's development that may not have arisen without their contribution. Todd better illustrates this type, who began the school year as meek and docile, though by the end of the film it is he who initiates the salute to Keating by standing on his desk. It may be that Todd had it in him all along, but one can easily envision Todd having never developed that sort of freedom without the influence of Keating and the friendship of Neil. It is certainly true that many people simply never get this sort of exposure to individuals who can act as guides, either because they are held back by socio-economic circumstances or simply due to the limited scope of personalities they encounter throughout life. For those persons, it might well be that whether or not they begin to develop a substantive freedom along the lines of Nietzsche's free spirit is entirely contingent upon an encounter with a guide.

Several other films depict this relationship of ordinary persons who become extraordinary as a result of a guide. One of my favorites is *The Corn is Green*, a film version of Emlyn William's popular play originally penned in 1938. The story also involves the relationship between a teacher and student; though here the teacher (Miss Moffat) is a woman in a rural Welsh mining town who opens a school for the children who work in the mine, and the student (Morgan Evans) is a teen-aged miner. Morgan, like the rest of the boys and young men who work the mine, is initially more interested in drinking at the pub than in school, but he soon shows a real talent for writing and learning. Miss Moffat offers not only encouragement, but, like Keating, provides the example of how the insights from education can be thrilling and empowering. He becomes a dedicated pupil, and eventually wins a scholarship to Oxford. The play was made into a film twice, once with Bette Davis in the role of Moffat (1945) and once with Katherine Hepburn (1979). The latter is by far my favorite, as Hepburn's performance, like Williams', succeeds in conveying the strength of the free spirit as guide. This film provides a very clear example of the ability of the mentor to provide the element in an individual's life that makes development toward the free spirit possible. It is unlikely that a poor Welsh miner would have become the intellectual and creative person that we see him as at the end of the film without Moffat. For one thing, he would never have had the necessary financial help in

securing an education, but more importantly, Morgan's social standing among his peers was a powerful deterrent to pursuing an education. That an elderly woman could lift him from that perspective to appreciate another, so alien to his prior experiences, is a strong testament to the effect of Moffat as guide.

Looking back to *La dolce vita*, consider the effect of the *loss* of a guide. Marcello is an example of an individual who already had attained many of the internal resources needed to develop into a free spirit, and in fact had already achieved a good deal of that development. He had grown beyond his provincial roots to appreciate a broader social perspective, and his literary intentions suggested that he had his own sense of a personally-chosen destination in mind. But Marcello's life was balanced between the distractions of his life style and his ambitions for something better. It was Steiner that drew Marcello toward the more authentic person he wanted to be, and it was largely due to Steiner's suicide that Marcello fell as far as he did. Had Steiner played a different role in Marcello's life, Marcello's future could have been different. The fact that Fellini ends the film with Marcello's failure is a poignant observation on how vulnerable we really are.

One of the best examples of a film that portrays both a free spirit and the significance of the free spirit as guide, however, deserves a much more detailed analysis.

Harold and Maude

Harold and Maude (directed by Hal Ashby and written by Colin Higgins) has become a cult classic since its release in 1971. It's often described as a comedic romance between 80-year-old Maude (Ruth Gordon) and the young Harold (Bud Cort), roughly 60 years her junior. But the appeal of this movie has little to do with its comedy or the romance, both of which are incidental to the really compelling element of this film: the attitude toward life that the characters espouse. Harold is a lost soul, who only maintains a sense of authentic self by acts of resistance to the authority figures in his life (and in this the film dates itself as a product of the early 1970s), while Maude exudes what amounts to the Yes-saying, life-affirming attitude of the Nietzschean free spirit. Maude is Harold's spiritual guide to a new perspective on life, and their romance is clearly subordinate to, and a consequence of, that relationship.

The first several minutes of the film introduces us to Harold's via the act that defines him. It's a carefully contrived suicide ritual – a

hanging – which we soon discover is a staged drama meant to upset his mother (Vivian Pickles). Throughout the movie, Harold will repeat these staged suicides many times, including acts of self-immolation, disembowelment, and drowning. In fact he seems obsessed with death: he drives about in an old hearse and daily attends the funerals of strangers. It is unclear how much of this obsession is due to a real attraction to death and how much is meant as a rebellion. His mother is controlling and self-absorbed, and more concerned with playing the role of mother than being one. He sees a psychologist, an austere Freudian who doesn't begin to understand Harold. And his uncle is a high-ranking military officer who comically caricatures the military patriot. He responds to all of these characters with a mock seriousness; he cannot really take them seriously because they make no effort to understand him. In sum, despite the wealth at his disposal, Harold's life is joyless.

Maude couldn't be more different. In fact, the flavor of the movie depends heavily on the contrast between their outlooks. Maude also attends funerals, where they meet, but right away we know that Maude is motivated by something completely different than Harold's obsession with death. 'I'll never understand this mania for black', she explains, dressed colorfully herself.[17] Funerals are fun, for Maude. They are part of the great circle of life, and as she is approaching her 80th birthday, she has become more curious – though not fearful – of death. The following exchange at the conclusion of their first meeting (which concludes with Maude speeding away in the minister's car) is telling of the difference between them:

Maude: Do you dance?
Harold: Pardon me?
Maude: Do you sing and dance?
Harold: Uhh... no.
Maude: 'Uhh... no.' I thought not.

Maude affirms life, even as she goes to funerals. In fact, if there is any common theme to the eccentricities of this character, it is her great reverence for life in all its forms, beautiful and ugly. Harold's obsession with death would seem to make them unlikely companions, and at one level this is certainly a case where opposites attract. But both also share a very important similarity: both are removed from the taken-for-granted social values and expectations that constitute normalcy. Both are individuals, the difference being that Harold

is unwillingly an outsider who can find no place in the world around him, and Maude is an individual who wills herself free as a way of enhancing life.

Maude immediately perceives that Harold is someone who could benefit from a different outlook on life. She pursues a friendship with him that he first finds merely curious, though he is quickly drawn into her world. And her world is uniquely her own. Her residence is essentially a museum, with all sorts of oddities and inventions designed to explore the senses and enhance experience. *She* sings and dances, and gives Harold a banjo, which he begins to teach himself to play. As they drive around areas in Southern California, she notices a tree suffering from the smog, and promptly steals the necessary tools to transport it to the woods. She disarms the police through charm and a disrespect for the law that so thoroughly confounds their expectations that she easily slips away while they stand confused. That's very characteristic of Maude: an eccentric who lives by her own rules, without any care for legal or social custom. Her primary goal is to experience life as deeply as possible, and Harold embraces her attitude as a meaningful alternative to the drab world he has previously known.

Much of the film concerns Maude's role as a spiritual guide for Harold. At one point, as they walk through a field of daises, Maude makes a distinction that should remind us of Nietzsche.

Maude: What flower would you like to be?
Harold: One of these maybe.
Maude: Why do you say that?
Harold: Because they're all alike.
Maude: But they're not – all kinds of observable differences. You see, Harold, much of the world's sorrow comes from people who are this [pointing to the particular daisy they hold], but allow themselves to be treated as that [pointing to the field].

This is a refrain throughout the movie: be yourself, and take joy in being yourself. Whether it's doing summersaults down a hill or appreciating Harold's choice of a demolition site as a choice of activities for the afternoon, Maude affirms and encourages his expressions. Whenever Harold limits his own experiences because of unthinking adherence to social expectations or his accustomed pessimism, Maude points out how life-denying that perspective is. The above exchange is an example

of that, as is the following, probably the richest dialogue in the movie in terms of the expression of a free spirit.

Harold: I sure am picking up on vices [after dragging from a hookah].
Maude: Vice, virtue, it's best not to be too moral. You cheat yourself out of too much life. Aim above morality. You apply that to life, and you're bound to live it fully.
Harold: I haven't lived. I've died a few times...
Maude: A lot of people enjoy being dead, but they're not dead, really. They're just backing away from life. Reach out, take a chance. Get hurt, even. Play as well as you can. Go, team, go! Give me an 'L', give me an 'I', give me a 'V', give me an 'E!' L – I – V – E live! Otherwise, you got nothing to talk about in the locker room.

While Maude never gives specifics of her past, the fact that she has suffered and overcome her own difficulties is another similarity to Nietzsche's description of the free spirit. She gives some vague descriptions of her youth, in Europe, and reminisces about fighting for the big causes, for rights and justice. She recalls a partner who had obviously been terribly significant in her life, 'but that was all before', she explains, and then becomes quiet. Of course, we're left asking 'before what?' but never get an answer. There is a strong hint a bit later in the movie, however. They are picnicking at a waste dump, and by this time Harold is falling for Maude romantically as well as a guide and friend. As they hold hands, Harold notices a mark on her arm, which is only revealed briefly. It appears, however, that it is a tattooed number, similar to those found on survivors of Nazi concentration camps. Whatever her past, it's clear that she has had to live through her own hell and that her current life-affirming attitude is in spite of, if not partly due to, whatever events are sparingly eluded to in the film. For someone like Harold, suffering his own difficulties with alienation, this is a powerful example of the ability of the human spirit to triumph over conditions that are likely far worse than his.

For all Maude's life-affirming attitude, she takes her own life on her 80th birthday. She and Harold had recently consummated their relationship, and at her birthday celebration he intends to propose. He finds out too late that she has already taken the pills that will end her life, and his attempt to rush her to the hospital is futile. This seems to be an ironic end to someone who celebrates life throughout the film,

until we realize that she met Harold attending funerals. For her, dying before her body wears out amounts to maximizing the quality of available life. It is therefore a form of affirmation, the very opposite of the suicide of Prof. Levy in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, which is apparently the result of depression or despair. Even if one objects to the rationality of her decision, there's no mistaking the motive: Maude will die on her own terms. This last gesture at living seems to be understood as such by Harold, at any rate. He is understandably hurt and angry at Maude's decision. His proclamation of love in the ambulance is met with Maude's consolation: 'Oh Harold, that's wonderful. Go and love some more.' In the final scene, it's unclear whether he can do that through his grief. Racing his customized hearse along the coastal cliff we are left to wonder whether he intends suicide, but he apparently jumps from the car before it plummets to its destruction. In the last shot, Harold awkwardly dances and plays the banjo, strumming the Cat Steven's tune *If You Want to Sing Out, Sing Out*, which has served as a musical theme throughout the film. He has learned Maude's lesson, we assume, and will attempt to 'go and love some more'.

There are many obvious ways in which Maude conveys the attitude of the free spirit, some of which bear strong resemblance to *Dead Poets Society's* Keating. To begin with, little need be said about the emphasis of the individual in the face of unthinking social conventions. Here, the authority figures of Harold's life – parent, psychiatrist, and military officer – present a repressive, unresponsive social context. Maude's emphasis on the appreciation of the individual daisy and its differences over the leveling anonymity of Harold's perspective is exactly the perspective that Keating tries to convey to his students and Nietzsche to his readers. It should be noted that Harold also emphasizes his individuality from the start of the film, but it's initially an individuality of alienation. Harold is separate and alone, with no meaningful connection to anything else. Maude's individuality contains with it a sense of purpose and belonging, but it's oriented to a sort of appreciation of things, and particularly of living, vibrant things, and not to any specific social conventions. She chooses her allegiances and friendships because they are meaningful to her, and that is a far cry from Harold's initial condition of separation from all meaningful aspects of his world, his 'backing away from life'.

Maude's attitude on morality is also a strong indication of her individuality and her similarity to the Nietzschean free spirit in general. On the one hand, she goes to great lengths to respect and care for living things, like the smog-choked tree; yet her advice to Harold to 'aim above morality', as well as her utter disrespect for legal and military

authorities, show that her morality will be chosen by her, not dictated by society. It's probably best to think of Maude not as amoral, but as not bound by conventional morality.

The allusion to a difficult past, with its hint of a Nazi concentration camp, adds a dimension to Maude's personality that suggests some difficult self-overcoming. Like Keating, we sense that this character has undergone significant development. As is often true with the narratives of actual free spirits, what seems to come easy and natural is in fact the result of willingness to stand up to challenges. (One might think of Nietzsche's camel metaphor here.) This makes her life-affirming attitude all the more remarkable. She has learned to appreciate life despite her past, or perhaps because of it. In fact, there could hardly be a better example of the Nietzschean metaphor of the child: a creative and yes-saying personality based, not on the naïveté of actual children but on the intellectual maturity of a developed individual, one who, like a child, need not think inside the box.

But Maude's character contains elements that go beyond Nietzsche's descriptions of the free spirit. To begin with, Maude is not an academic, like Keating or Nietzsche himself. The latter advocate freedom by placing themselves within the context of great writers: Keating through poetry, Nietzsche through a reference to a broad range of Western thinkers. Keating encourages his students to gain insights into life through the words of Whitman, Thoreau, and others. Nietzsche provides critiques of dominant philosophical theories and gives an alternate genealogy to the development of existing values. In both these cases, free thinking is a matter of absorbing and navigating the work of past masters, though the desired outcome is for persons to think for themselves about the most important and meaningful matters in human affairs. Maude's free thinking, on the other hand, stems from a variety of very personal experiences and observations. She is able to think creatively about the most common of experiences and find unexpected meaningful vantage points: for example, her appreciation of a decrepit tree that would hardly register to the average passerby, or her view of funerals as beautiful ceremonies which constitute part of the circle of life. Her home is full of inventions to find new ways to stimulate the senses. Maude, in short, is not so much driven by the great ideas of pervious thinkers as an appreciation for what experience offers through a courageous and affirming attitude. She is an explorer, not a scholar, finding the extraordinary in what others consider ordinary.[18]

As an example of a free spirit, in fact, Maude shows us important insights that Nietzsche misses. Her creativity is less a reaction to

her ability to overcome values and more an appreciation of all the opportunities that life offers. The creativity of the nobler, higher, freer types that Nietzsche describes is usually aimed at the level of general social norms. He very often describes the noble personalities as those celebrating their contrast to 'lower' types. They are creators of new moral values, new aesthetics, who have overcome the old. The warrior imagery that is so common in Nietzsche's writing is aimed at the destruction of worn-out social norms, and it is often suggested that free spirits can serve society by moving the culture forward. Most notably, Nietzsche's ultimate free spirit, the *Übermensch* made famous in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, heralds a new type of human being, one who inspires a cultural evolution. Maude's freedom, on the other hand, is far less directed at an engagement of stagnant cultural values and much more directed at day-to-day life and a personal attitude toward the world. Finding a demolition site or a waste dump a great place to picnic is a rare creative act, but it amounts to the ability to find delight in the mundane; it does not require the social contrasts so often intimated in Nietzsche's description of the free and the noble. And though sometimes we do see Maude as aggressive and even warrior-like (the sportsman-like cheerleading she gives to Harold comes to mind), far more often she exudes a gentleness. Her nature is more appreciative and less aggressive than the personalities that Nietzsche champions. Again, this is not to say that Nietzsche excludes this personality from the variety of ways he describes free spirits, but Nietzsche's works do not capture the nature of this personal perspective as well as Maude's character does in this film. Maude's perspective shows how the attitude of the free spirit, when directed at the immediate, day-to-day perspective on the world, can lead to a meaningful appreciation for living. She is not an *Übermensch*; her free spiritedness is more humble, more attuned to the natural world, more celebratory of her personal life. And in this sense, Maude might better exemplify Emerson and Thoreau than Nietzsche. It also suggests why Nietzsche's chauvinism and anti-feminine attitudes hurt his philosophy. He is unable to appreciate this different perspective that in so many other ways satisfies his own values.

Maude's personal touch is precisely what allows her to guide Harold. Keating serves as a guide largely in his capacity as role model and mentor, but Harold's block to freedom arose largely from his unmet emotional needs, and for that reason Maude is a far more effective influence on Harold than a Keating could have been. When Maude reaches out to Harold, she understands that his ability to appreciate life requires an emotional balm that she is happy to administer. The help she lends

Harold in developing his freedom is of a much different kind, then, than we find with a more intellectually minded mentor like Keating. True, Keating's relationship with his students is, to an extent, personal, particularly when he counsels them outside of class; but it is a student-teacher relationship, which is largely constituted by barriers that define their roles. No matter how progressive Keating is, he is always a teacher first. Even when he reaches out to his students as friends, he is not intimate with them as they are with each other. Maude is, on many levels, far more intimate with Harold, and that is exactly what Harold needs in order to develop a sense of self-worth and confidence, the foundations upon which he can finally affirm himself.

Like some of Keating's students, Harold's development depends on the sort of guidance Maude provides; he may never have developed a freer perspective if it wasn't for the intervention of someone who understood his alienation and knew how to reach him. We get the sense that he's an outsider, but the real problem is the ineffectiveness of his relationship with those who are supposed to be close to him, especially his mother. Harold's lack of freedom wasn't due so much to his inability to critique values. Rather, he could not go the next step and live a positive, affirming life. In that way, Harold at the start of the film is somewhat like Marcello from *La dolce vita*; both are intelligent enough to see through the façade that so many others take for granted and are yet unable to muster the inner resources to take control of their lives. Marcello's relationship with Steiner was also personal, like Harold's with Maude, and the disillusionment following Steiner's death is just what we would expect from someone who needed help in breaking from his routines and bad habits. Near the end of *Harold and Maude*, by contrast, Harold finds great delight in announcing to all the authorities that had previously constituted his social world that he was proposing to an 80-year-old woman. He is able to do so in part because he has grown under Maude's influence, but also because Maude validates his identity. He is confirmed in the eyes of the Other, to use a Sartrean description, and that was precisely what was lacking in his relationship with his mother. This is an aspect of the guide that we just do not get from Nietzsche: the fact that the road to freedom will often rely on the emotional support and care from a guide. In fact, the need for others is more often described by Nietzsche as an aspect of herd mentality. If anything serves as an example of Nietzsche's free spirit in his own writings, it's Zarathustra. But *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* begins with Zarathustra coming down from the mountain. He develops his free perspective alone first, then decides to share his wisdom with those who are figuratively and literally beneath him. It's not clear to

what extent Maude herself did or did not rely on the aide of others in the development of her freedom, but Harold ends the movie far freer than he began it, and it's largely due to Maude's role as a guide at an intellectual *and* emotional level. If Nietzsche thinks that solitude is the only road open to the authentic free person, then he is just wrong, and this film helps us understand why.

Of course, these are movie characters, not actual people. I have made the case repeatedly that the right sorts of movies can still be accurate descriptions of the human experience, as long as we keep a critical eye on what does contribute to our understanding of actual human narratives. But we might pause before accepting *Harold and Maude* as realistic in this sense, because so much of the movie is very much intended as caricature and humor. Harold's mother, for example, is an ensemble of stereotypes about wealthy, single matrons, particularly in her manner of speaking, flare for dramatics, and classist condescension. Police officers are all authority-hungry baboons. Worse, Maude herself is decided unrealistic in terms of our experiences about what people could really be like. She not only steals cars, but she drives like a Hollywood stunt person, and at one point gives a holler that is superimposed with Tarzan's jungle cry. While it's certainly possible to live Maude's outlook in part, it seems unlikely that anyone could live so utterly free and stay out of prison for long. Keating was far more realistic along these lines: his free thinking was seen as a threat by the institution he challenged, and the backlash was predictable. Can Maude, who is in some ways over-the-top and decidedly unrealistic, really teach us something about human nature?

As I argued in Chapter 3, we have to approach films like this with a discerning eye. Yes, much of this movie is unrealistic, but much of it is. Specifically, Maude's attitudes and perspectives are indeed possible, and again, many of us have known people who are like this in part. That Maude could successfully live free to the *extent* she does may in fact be unrealistic, but we do not need to think that someone like this could actually exist for the character to effectively show us plausible alternatives for how we might live. We know most of the attitudes and perspectives she adopts is possible, and we know that some people do achieve these heights. For example, people *are* able to emphasize the importance of finding new experiences as crucial to growth and enjoyment, people *are* able to emphasize what is special in the particular over the banality of the group, and people *are* able to discern moral conventions which are dated and perhaps harmful from those which serve to respect life. Maude may be an ideal free spirit, and edifying for that reason, but

we do not need to think that we could actually achieve her way of living and looking at things to be motivated to be *more* like her. Perhaps the effect of Maude on Harold is similar to what we might expect Maude could be like for us: Harold does not become just like Maude, but we think he has learned something valuable, that he is more of a free spirit now than before he encountered her. And for that reason, he can now live more meaningfully than he could before.

Movies like this, then, do more than just describe what happens when some persons like Harold, or the students at Keating's prep school, come into contact with someone like Maude or Keating. We, the audience, also come into contact with these characters. We also benefit from them as guides for our own ways of looking at the world. They can help *us* be freer, too. In fact, all of the films discussed in this book can do that, whether it's by giving us edifying examples of a free spirit or by showing us that some roads lead to despair or meaninglessness. While it is important enough to be able to take some insightful observations back to a study of philosophy and be better philosophers for it, existentialism is primarily concerned with how life is actually lived. At the end of the day, that's what is best about a study of films that have found something vital to say about the human condition. They help us live freer, more honestly, more authentically, and more meaningfully.

Conclusion

While in many ways the preceding chapters have been a celebration of existentialism, it's clear that the philosophical theories in this area are not without their problems. The films discussed in this book often complicate or discredit some of the views of the major philosophers; and this is particularly true of two core elements of existentialism: freedom and individuality.

Several films reveal the limits of our freedom. Antonioni's work finds the right visual associations in architecture and nature to convey the inner life of his characters, but in so doing he shows us the extent to which people are the product of their environment. Piero and Sandro are largely who they are because of the influence of money and upper-class society. Piero seems at a loss to understand Vittoria, because alternatives to his own worldview seem incomprehensible. The stock market is his home, and he is as out of his element in the EUR as Vittoria is in the Roman financial district. Sartre tells us that we can always choose otherwise, but can these characters really choose a perspective that will make their relationship work? The closing shots of *L'eclisse*, emphasizing the lovers' meeting place bereft of the lovers suggests that they cannot, or at least that the matter is more complicated than simply choosing to think differently. Not only do the characters seem largely determined by their social environment, but they lack the resources needed to make a meaningful choice. The collage of industrial images suggests a dehumanized cultural landscape, one that discourages relationships or the foundation of a meaningful life. In *L'avventura*, Sandro has a sense of what is missing, but again, the world in which he lives is one where he can find nothing other than sexual adventures to occupy himself. He is inauthentic, but it is difficult to place all the blame on him. Sandro's world view seems stunted, as it does with many of the characters in

Antonioni's films. Again, Sartre, in his early, existentialist work, puts the responsibility on the individual, and if he is correct we would have to blame Piero and Sandro for who they are. But the presence of the world in Antonioni's films is such that we doubt the characters really have chosen these values and interpretations; they do not seem to own their view of the world the way one does who *is* capable of making meaningful choices. If Antonioni's descriptions are correct, we are not so free after all.

Other movies discussed in this book seem to corroborate the difficulty of developing freedom in the modern world. In Fellini's films, the emphases on money and status are enormous influences on the protagonists. Marcello fails to affirm his literary ambitions in large part because the cultural fascination with the rich and famous rewards him for catering to that set of values. In Allen's films, men commit murder to protect their status. They are able to rationalize their decisions because the perceived importance of their social position justifies protecting it by any means necessary. For the sake of a good education and economically successful career, Neil's father in *Dead Poets Society* denies his son the one thing that is meaningful in his life, and Keating loses his job because the administration of the school would rather protect the academy's standing in the community than keep a gifted teacher, no matter what the overall effect on the students is. These are the social pressures that resist our very ability to choose. For many persons, making significant choices is not like picking the color of your clothes or the name of a pet. They may be simply unable to conceive alternatives or overcome internal barriers, and to say that such persons have simply failed to make the right choices – that the responsibility is all their own – seems to misunderstand how vulnerable the capacity to choose really is.

The emphasis on individuality in existentialism is troublesome for similar reasons, at least if the films discussed in this book have any veracity. While it may be important to affirm your goals and values because they are meaningful to you, others can have a considerable influence on our ability to do so. The Nietzschean free spirit who delights in the cold heights of the mountain tops may well be an ideal for Nietzsche, but accomplishing that ability to think freely depends on who is willing to help you – or resist you – along the way. The social pressures described above constitute one form of resistance, but many of the films discussed in the preceding chapters show that personal relationships are directly related to our ability to make meaningful choices. Bergman's characters, in most of his films, are deeply dependent upon one another. Tomas and Märta in *Winter Light* are obvious examples: he

denies her the relationship that she states quite explicitly would make her life more meaningful. Tomas's sense of abandonment, first by the passing of his wife, then by the distance and silence of God, makes it difficult for him to find meaning in his career or his life. In *L'avventura*, Claudia is willing to sacrifice her friendship with Anna for the sake of her relationship with Sandro, only to find in the end how little invested *he* was in their relationship. Sandro's betrayal isn't just a personal failure, it undermines Claudia's decision to make a meaningful commitment to him, a choice made at a great cost to herself.

These examples demonstrate how relationships can be inherent sources of meaning. Films excel at this, since relationships are a favorite theme for moviemakers. But other films show us how important others can be in simply helping us find our identity or sense of self worth. This is most clear in the cases of Keating and Maude, who are not only free spirits, but guides through which others are able to affirm themselves. They empower those around them, giving them the means to live authentically even after the guides themselves have left. Conversely, the lack of such figures in one's life may mean that some will never develop their freedom. No one better exemplifies this than Marcello: his relationship with Steiner provided ambition to live more authentically, and his ultimate disillusionment was the catalyst for his downfall. In all these cases, it was the personal nature of the relationship with others that enabled others to become freer. While this observation may not be at odds with the majority of existentialists, it is certainly an underappreciated aspect of their description of the human condition, without which their account is incomplete.

It has been my intention in this book to use the films to make these criticisms, but theorists have made similar points in academic discussions. As already noted, Sartre himself would retreat from the radical sense of freedom in his later works. Foucault, with his analysis of the power inherent in social institutions, would supplant him as the face of French philosophy, followed by various postmodernists and critical theorists who would deconstruct the phenomenological basis of twentieth century existentialism. That is not to say that there is no work being done in this field; several vibrant academic societies and journals continue debates in phenomenology and existentialism. Overall, however, these disciplines are no longer the cutting edge of academic philosophy, even on the continent, where its influence was overwhelming for much of the twentieth century.

But the existentialists also get something right. Much of my intention in Chapter 1 is to characterize existentialism as a school of thought that

sets out to understand how we make a meaningful life for ourselves. This concern is as relevant today as it was in existentialism's heyday. While it may not be in vogue in the ivory tower, these are the issues that still fascinate students and thinking persons generally. What is an authentic life? Am I really free? Am I in bad faith? What should be my attitude toward religion and religiosity (or spirituality)? All of these questions are part of the larger one: What is a meaningful life? These questions are fundamental to human beings, and have been at least since Socrates proclaimed the importance of knowing thyself. The existentialists attempted to work out the implications of our contemporary circumstances in understanding these issues, and since the conditions of society are largely the same today as they were in the last century (concerning the bases for human values, the basic world view informed by science, the social and economic pressures to conform, etc.), the work of the existentialists is not at all irrelevant, nor will it be for the foreseeable future.

The films discussed here demonstrate what seems right about existentialism even more effectively than they show its shortcomings. This is certainly the case when it comes to showing how important it is to achieve an authentic attitude. Forced to either provide an inadequate film which appeases the demands of everyone around him or ditch the project altogether, Guido chooses the latter. His is not exactly a success story, but we can respect his authenticity. In Antonioni's films, Claudia and Vittoria maintain their sincerity while friends and lovers too often prove shallow. Similarly, *Winter Light*'s Märta knows what she wants and stays true to her life's chosen project, even if it seems hopeless that the man she loves will return that affection. There may be no happy endings here, but the characters provide examples of persons maintaining meaning despite enormous challenges. In fact, it is precisely the dark nature of their situation that makes their authentic attitude and free spiritedness edifying. We may not want to live their lives, but we may want to be more like them in character. Similar things could be said for Cliff in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* and free spirits Maude and Keating. We can cheer them for being the kind of people they are, just as we are disappointed when Marcello or Hally (Cliff's love interest in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*) sell out. These films show us the value of personal choice, commitment, responsibility, and the pay off of maintaining an authentic perspective in the face of the inducements of comfort, acceptance, or money.

It seems clear to me that from a theoretical perspective, we must hone the philosophical theories on existentialism. For example, I think that

a reworking of the basic views of a narrative existentialism, sketched briefly in Chapter 3, might fare better with regard to our social involvement in the world than the phenomenological approach espoused by Heidegger, Sartre, and the host of philosophers in their lineage. This is an example of a way to discuss the important topics of authenticity, choice, meaning, etc. in a vocabulary which can accommodate a sense of freedom that is vulnerable and dependent upon processes of development. My point, in general, is that the limitations on freedom and individuality discussed above are not reasons to jettison existentialism altogether; rather, we should amend our views to take these limitations into account. If our freedom is vulnerable and the outcome of an uncertain development – and yet is necessary in order to choose meaningful lives in the contemporary world – then we must pay attention to the social conditions under which persons develop and the necessary resources (both intellectual and emotional) necessary for that development. In any event, it is clear that we are by no means past these issues, though our account of them may need to change as our understanding of the world, and the conditions which shape our lives, also changes.

Of course, the existentialists' issues need not be approached through philosophy at all, and that has been one of the main points of the book. Artists also think about these things and make statements through their art. We have seen how a filmmaker like Antonioni can express human experience by capturing the defining spaces and places so important to being-in-the-world, expressing humanity through the images of the world we inhabit. Fellini and Bergman reveal the emotions and turmoils of our life by aligning the viewer with the main characters and conveying their inner world. Allen takes the narratives that raise the deepest questions and plays them out, showing us how people might act and react to crises in meaning. What all of these filmmakers do best, in terms of advancing our understanding of the human condition, is reveal experience. Münsterberg's characterization of cinema as overcoming the causal requirements of the outer world to more accurately capture the reality of the inner world is the most important reason why film can contribute to existentialism. The concreteness of the visual depiction combined with the power of editing and cinematography position the viewer in the perspective of the protagonist, yielding an account of life quite unlike what we get from a verbal medium. Filmmakers do not just show us narratives, they show us *how* we narrate life, or *could* narrate life.

This book, then, has been an attempt to put the philosophers' account of existentialist themes in dialogue with the filmmakers' insights into

the human condition. The philosophy has given us a vocabulary in which to articulate the themes of the films, and the films have given us ground to corroborate or critique the suitability of that vocabulary. But the films have all been fictional narratives. Do these works of art reveal life as it really is, or just as unique artists, perhaps unrepresentative ones at that, view life? In Chapter 3 I argued that we define our own lives via narration, so an account that is bound by subjective interpretations and emphases isn't unrealistic as an account of life. Now that these depictions have been offered, the more urgent issue is whether the interpretations presented in this book have captured something true about what most of us go through. Readers must judge that for themselves. I have chosen films because they did strike me as true, at least in some crucial way. Everyone will have to compare the films to their own experiences, and if a film reminds them of things they have seen or felt or thought, or if it suggests to them new ways of thinking that they deem possible, then the film will have revealed some important truth. I know that Keating is a fictional character (though based on real models), but I also know that I have been in the presence of excellent instructors who have made me change my view of the world. As an instructor, the film is plausible enough that I think his teaching style is in some ways worth emulating. Maude is absolutely unrealistic in many ways, but her life-affirming attitude is one that I have encountered elsewhere. At a personal level, it reminds me that I should reconnect with that attitude more. At a theoretical level, it provides an example of what is missing in views like Nietzsche's. Marcello likely resonates with many people, either because they know persons who have had a similar fate, or because they have felt the same temptation Marcello did to accept an easy and financially rewarding alternative to their more meaningful goals.

Not everyone may agree on what these movies show us about ourselves, of course, but the discussion advances understanding even if it doesn't produce consensus. Good films get people talking, and a big part of the motivation for combining film and existentialist philosophy has been the fact that audiences are reached by the sorts of films discussed in these pages. As such they serve as accessible points from which to engage thinking and conversation on meaningful issues. I have attempted to articulate just where I think the films have shown us something important and true about the human condition, and I consider these writings to be a contribution to ongoing discussions in both film studies and existentialism. I hope the reader will agree that sometimes we understand more when we engage these disciplines together than when we pursue them apart.

Notes

1 Existentialism: An Overview of Important Themes and Figures

1. For example, Plato's *Apology*, with its emphasis on authentic striving toward self-knowledge, has elements that sound much like contemporary existentialism, though of course the views of Socrates and Plato differ sharply from true existentialists on a number of issues.
2. Jean-Paul Sartre, 'The Humanism of Existentialism', *Essays in Existentialism* (New Jersey: Citadel Press, 1965), p. 32.
3. I have in mind such figures as Descartes and Leibniz as representatives of a philosophy seeking the essential nature of human beings, Kant for morality, Aquinas for religion.
4. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 232.
5. Søren Kierkegaard, *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, ed. Robert Bretall (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 201.
6. Ibid., p. 203.
7. Ibid., p. 213.
8. Ibid., p. 211n.
9. Ibid., p. 215.
10. Ibid., p. 212.
11. Ibid., p. 133.
12. Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, p. 169.
13. Henri F. Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious* (New York: Basic Books, 1970), p. 273.
14. Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, pp. 263–264.
15. Ibid., p. 279.
16. See, for example, section 4 in Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*, p. 79.
17. Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, p. 255.
18. See section 38 in *Twilight of the Idols*. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Basic Books, 1970), pp. 541–543.
19. 'The Reevaluation of All Values' is the title to a work of four essays that Nietzsche never completed. The first book of that series, *The Antichrist*, was one of his last.
20. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 160.
21. Ibid., p. 290.
22. Ibid., p. 307.
23. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956), p. 24.
24. Ibid., p. 620.
25. Ibid., p. 65.

26. Ibid.
27. Sartre, 'Humanism of Existentialism', p. 47.
28. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 89.
29. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New Jersey: Citadel Press, 1949), p. 11.
30. Ibid., p. 12.
31. Ibid., p. 37.
32. Ibid., p. 38.
33. For a version of Sartre's more mature, qualified position on freedom see Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Vol. 1*, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith, ed. Jonathan Rée (London and New York: Verso, 1985).
34. Beauvoir, *Ethics*, p. 24.
35. Tillich, 'The Lost Dimension in Religion', *The Essential Tillich*, ed. F. Forrester Church (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 1.
36. Ibid., p. 2.
37. Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 108.
38. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 1* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 134.
39. Ibid., p. 137.

2 Film as a Tool for Philosophical Investigation

1. The arguments in this section were originally introduced by me in an earlier article. For a more complete account of why film by and large ought not be considered a form of philosophy, see William Pamerleau, 'Film as a Non-Philosophical Resource for Philosophy Instruction', *Film and Philosophy* 13 (Special Edition 2009).
2. Mary M. Litch's *Philosophy Through Film* provides an introduction to the perennial problems in the history of philosophy (skepticism, relativism, personal identity, etc.) via a discussion of films. Mary M. Litch, *Philosophy Through Film* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 1–2.
3. Stephen Mulhall, *On Film* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 2.
4. Jerry Goodenough, 'Introduction I: A Philosopher Goes to the Cinema', in *Film as Philosophy: Essays on Cinema after Wittgenstein and Cavell*, ed. Rupert Read and Jerry Goodenough (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan: 2005), p. 25. On the show/tell distinction, see also Julian Baggini, 'Alien Ways of Thinking', *Film-Philosophy* 7, no. 24 (August 2003), <http://www.film-philosophy.com/archive/vol7-2003/>.
5. Paisley Livingston, 'Theses on Cinema as Philosophy', in *Thinking Through Cinema: Film as Philosophy*, ed. Murray Smith and Thomas E. Wartenberg (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), p. 12.
6. Thomas E. Wartenberg, 'Philosophy Screened: Experiencing *The Matrix*', in *The Philosophy of Film: Introductory Text and Readings*, ed. Thomas E. Wartenberg and Angela Curran (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p. 275.
7. Wartenberg, 'Philosophy Screened', p. 281.
8. Thomas E. Wartenberg, 'Beyond *Mere* Illustration: How Films Can Be Philosophy', in *Thinking Through Cinema*, p. 30.

9. Bruce Russell, 'Film's Limits: The Sequel', *Film and Philosophy* 12 (2008): 1.
10. Russell, 'Film's Limits', p. 8.
11. Consider this observation by Fellini: 'I do not make moral judgments, I'm not qualified to do so. ... I dislike analyzing, I am not an orator, a philosopher or a theorist. I am merely a story-teller and the cinema is my work.' Federico Fellini, *Fellini on Fellini* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996), p. 51.
12. Murray Smith, 'Film Art, Argument, and Ambiguity', in *Thinking Through Cinema*, p. 40.
13. Noël Carroll, 'Philosophy in the Moving Image: Response to Bruce Russell', *Film and Philosophy* 12 (2008): 21.
14. Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1947), pp. 195–199.
15. Stanley Cavell makes a similar point when he is asked to explain how films can think. 'My formulation employing the work's thinking or intending or wanting something, is meant to emphasize the sense that the work wants something of us who behold or hear or read it. This is a function of our determining what we want of it, why or how we are present at it – what our relation to it is.' I take Cavell to be saying that the reference to what a film thinks is just shorthand for saying that the film makes *us* think. Stanley Cavell, 'What Becomes of Thinking on Film? (Stanley Cavell in conversation with Andrew Klevan)', in *Film as Philosophy*, p. 186.
16. Wartenberg, 'What Else Can Films Do?' in *Film and Philosophy* 12 (2008): 32.
17. Seymour Chatman, 'What Novels Can Do That Films Can't (and Vice Versa)', in *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 443.
18. David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p. 212.
19. For a fuller account see Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846) in *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, pp. 196–207 (see Ch. 1, n. 5).
20. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, p. 307 (see Ch. 1, no. 18).
21. It is the phenomenologists who articulate this point in terms of analysis of consciousness. I am understanding this development, which reaches its zenith with Husserl and Heidegger, as the theoretical child of the subjectivity described first by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Of course, the story is far more complicated than that, and a complete telling would include Kant's transcendental idealism, among other things. I am focusing only on the implications for existentialism here.
22. Peter Fonda, in *A Decade Under the Influence*, DVD, directed by Ted Demme and Richard LaGravenese (New Video Group, 2003).
23. Colin Wilson, for example, argues that the Sartrean brand of existentialism emphasizes the negative elements of freedom more than the positive ones, thus leaving his work open to these darker consequences. See Colin Wilson, *Introduction to The New Existentialism* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1966), p. 32.
24. Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Existentialism is a Humanism', in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Meridian Books, 1975), pp. 367–368.
25. Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), pp. 316–326.

26. For a good discussion of how both feminism and Marxism challenge the existentialist emphasis on subjectivity see Judith Butler, 'Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig and Foucault', in *Feminism and Critique*, ed. Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 128–142.
27. Kendall Walton argues that the use of photography in the production of film makes us *see* the objects photographed in a way that other media, like painting, can never do. 'The invention of the camera gave us not just a new method of making pictures and not just pictures of a new kind: it gave us a new way of seeing.' Kendall L. Walton, 'Film, Photography, and Transparency', in *The Philosophy of Film: Introductory Texts and Readings*, ed. Thomas E. Wartenberg and Angela Curran (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 70–71.
28. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).
29. Andrè Bazin, *What is Cinema?, Vol. I*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 12.
30. Ibid., p. 14.
31. Ibid., p. 98.
32. Andrè Bazin, *What is Cinema?, Vol. II*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 28.
33. Hugo Münsterberg, *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1916), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15383/15383-h/15383-h.htm>, ch. 7.
34. Ibid., ch. 7.
35. Ibid., ch. 8.
36. J. Dudley Andrew, *The Major Film Theories: An Introduction* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 22.
37. Münsterberg, *Photoplay*, ch. 9.
38. Bélá Balázs, *Theory of the Film* (New York: Dover Books, 1970), p. 55.
39. James Monaco, *How to Read a Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 246.
40. Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).
41. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997), pp. 463–464.
42. Woody Allen, *Woody Allen on Woody Allen: In Conversation with Stig Björkman*, (New York: Grove Press, 1993), p. 211.

3 Film Realism and Narrative Identity

1. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (New York: The McGraw Hill Companies, Inc., 1997), p. 170.
2. Some of the arguments for and against realism I originally laid out elsewhere. See William Pamerleau, 'Film Realism and Narrative Identity', *Film and Philosophy* 11 (2007): 87–102.
3. Jacques Aumont, Alain Bergala, Michel Marie and Marc Vernet, *Aesthetics of Film*, trans. and rev. by Richard Neupert (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), p. 109.

4. Jacques Aumont, Alain Bergala, Michel Marie and Marc Vernet, *Aesthetics of Film*, trans. and rev. by Richard Neupert, p. 117.
5. Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Leo Bruady and Marshall Cohenby (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 841.
6. For a discussion of the complexities of racism in cinema, even among well-meaning filmmakers, see Robert Stam and Louise Spence, 'Colonialism, Racism, and Representation: An Introduction', in *Film Theory and Criticism*, pp. 235–250. See also Manthia Diawara, 'Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance', in *Film Theory and Criticism*, pp. 845–854.
7. Aumont et al., *Aesthetics of Film*, p. 114.
8. Sergei Eisenstein, 'Beyond the Shot', in *Film Theory and Criticism*, pp. 15–22.
9. Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art*, p. 79. Bordwell gives a much fuller account of this distinction in his text on film narrative. See David Bordwell, *Narration in the Ficiton Film* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p. 50.
10. Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 21.
11. Noël Carroll, 'The Power of Movies', in *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art – The Analytic Tradition*, ed. Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 492.
12. Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, p. 62.
13. Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, p. 33.
14. 'The multiple authorship theory of films encourages us to look at films the same way as we do jazz: as a product of many individuals, whose work is inflected in a complex manner by their interactions with their colleagues.' Berys Gaut, 'Film Authorship and Collaboration', in *Film Theory and Philosophy*, ed. Richard Allen and Murray Smith (New York: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 166.
15. Noël Carroll describes the narrative of conventional films as consisting of questions that are asked and then answered later in the film. This sort of description, again, suggests that intelligent choices were made, but it does not commit us to identifying something like a single author. Noël Carroll, 'The Power of Movies', p. 495.
16. Chatman's full analysis is too complicated to convey here. For a diagram detailing the various types of authors, audiences, and their relationship, see Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, p. 267.
17. E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 298.
18. Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, p. 28. Bordwell describes this process in essentially the same way. Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, pp. 33–40.
19. See also Murray Smith's description of a 'person schema' that allows audiences, even from widely different cultures, to construct essential elements of a character that are crucial to an appreciation of film narratives. Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Motion, and Cinema* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 22. He also discusses the process whereby the general narrative is constructed largely through viewer expectations, pp. 47–51.

20. As Aumont et al. point out, 'by the weight of the social system to which the represented object belongs, and by its visible presence, every figuration and representation calls forth narration, or at least an embryonic form of it.' *Aesthetics of Film*, p. 69.
21. Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, p. 95. Gombrich makes this point about visual art in general throughout *Art and Illusion*.
22. Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, p. 143.
23. Ibid., p. 154.
24. Ibid., p. 175.
25. David Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 9.
26. Ibid., p. 59.
27. Ibid.
28. The attempt to account for the self without reference to a metaphysical core begins in earnest with Nietzsche. Alexander Nehamas argues that Nietzsche's view of the self is also a narrative one. Since there is nothing to us but a set of dynamically related events and experiences, incorporating past events into a meaningful account of who we are amounts to a choice among possible narratives. See Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 155–169.
29. Murray Smith, for example, is concerned with the extent to which characters mimic persons. Against the structuralists' critiques that characters are mere constructs of convention and for that reason suspect, he points out, as I have done in this chapter, that theories like Carr's and Ricoeur's show that persons are also constructs. Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters*, p. 33.
30. Noël Carroll, 'Film, Emotion, and Genre', from *Philosophy of Film and Motion Pictures*, ed. Noel Carroll and Jinhee Choi (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), p. 221.
31. Carroll has also discussed the importance of framing, focus, etc., in guiding the viewers' understanding of a film. See Noël Carroll, 'The Power of Movies', pp. 491–495.
32. James Monaco, *How to Read a Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 194.
33. Recall Gombrich's insights: *all* images are perceptions that we learn to make as the result of social and psychological expectations.
34. Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, p. 205.
35. Ibid., p. 212.
36. Noël Carroll, 'Philosophy in the Moving Image: Response to Bruce Russell', in *Film and Philosophy* 12 (2008): 18–19.
37. Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History*, p. 5.
38. Ibid., p. 92.
39. Ibid., p. 94.
40. I have argued elsewhere that Beauvoir's descriptions of freedom in developmental terms, as described in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, makes her philosophy more in-line with views that acknowledge a socialized self than the standard phenomenological approaches of Sartre and others. See William Pamerleau, 'Making a Meaningful Life: Rereading Beauvoir', in *Philosophy in*

the Contemporary World 6, nos. 3–4, (Fall–Winter 1999): 79–82. These observations will also be discussed in Chapter 4.

4 Antonioni: Meaninglessness and the Modern World

1. Seymour Chatman, *Antonioni: Or, The Surface of the World* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 2.
2. Recall the distinction in Chapter 3 between a narrative and a chronicle.
3. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 653 (see Chap. 1, n. 25).
4. Ibid., p. 721.
5. See, for example, Nietzsche's deconstruction of subjectivity in *The Twilight of the Idols*, pp. 494–495 (see Chap. 1, n. 18).
6. Michelangelo Antonioni and Marga Cottino-Jones, *The Architecture of Vision: Writings and Interviews on Cinema*, ed. Carlo Di Carlo and Giorgio Tinazzi (New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1996), p. 188.
7. Karl Marx, *Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 83.
8. Chatman, *Antonioni*, p. 60.
9. Michelangelo Antonioni, 'Cannes Statement', Criterion Collection, <http://www.criterionco.com/asp/release.asp?id=98&eid=107&section=essay>.
10. Chatman, *Antonioni*, pp. 99–101.
11. Ibid., p. 68.
12. All dialogue quoted from this movie is taken from the subtitles of the DVD. *L'avventura*, DVD, directed by Michelangelo Antonioni (1960; The Criterion Collection, 2001).
13. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), pp. xxii–xxxi.
14. Peter Brunette, *The Films of Michelangelo Antonioni* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 34.
15. All dialogue quoted from this movie is taken from the subtitles of the DVD. *L'eclisse*, DVD, directed by Michelangeo Antonioni (1962; The Criterion Collection, 2005).
16. William Arrowsmith, *Antonioni: The Poet of Images* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 75.
17. Arrowsmith, *Antonioni*, p. 76.
18. Chatman, *Antonioni*, p. 108.
19. Ibid., p. 85.
20. Antonioni, *Architecture of Vision*, p. 60.
21. Brunette, *Films of Michelangelo Antonioni*, p. 88.
22. Antonioni, *Architecture of Vision*, p. 199.
23. I've alluded to this already in Part I. The general criticism stems from the Cartesian emphasis on consciousness that marks phenomenology in general. Alternate views see the self as inherently social and the product of intersubjective activity. The American pragmatists advocated this perspective, and more recently Jürgen Habermas has critiqued the 'philosophy of consciousness' generally for its inability to appreciate the social dimension of the self. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 2*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), pp. 53–76.

24. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, pp. 220–228 (see Chap. 1, n. 35).
25. Simone de Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 38 (see Chap. 1, n. 31).
26. William Pamerleau, 'Making a Meaningful Life: Rereading Beauvoir', *Philosophy in the Contemporary World* 6, nos. 3–4 (Fall–Winter 1999): 79–83.
27. Antonioni, *Architect of Vision*, p. 158.
28. Chatman, *Antonioni*, p. 66.
29. David Bordwell, 'The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice', in *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 722.

5 Religiosity in the Films of Ingmar Bergman

1. Ingmar Bergman, *Three Films by Ingmar Bergman*, trans. Paul Britten Austen (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1970), p. 7.
2. Ingmar Bergman, *Images: My Life in Film*, trans. Marianne Ruuth (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1994), p. 245.
3. Ingmar Bergman, subtitles from *Ingmar Bergman Makes a Movie*, DVD, produced by Bo Bjelfvenstam (1963; Criterion Collection, 2003).
4. All dialogue quoted from this film are subtitles from the DVD. *Through a Glass Darkly*, directed by Ingmar Bergman (1961; Criterion Collection, 2003).
5. Ingmar Bergman, *Three Films by Ingmar Bergman*, p. 54.
6. All dialogue quoted from this film are subtitles from the DVD. *Winter Light*, directed by Ingmar Bergman (1962; Criterion Collection, 2003).
7. Subtitles from *Bergman Makes a Movie*.
8. Ibid.
9. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 181 (see Chap. 1, n. 4).
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Essays in Existentialism*, pp. 40–41 (see Chap. 1, n. 2).
14. Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, p. 61 (see Chap. 1, n. 37).
15. Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 1*, p. 14 (see Chap. 1, n. 38).
16. Ibid., p. 211.
17. Paul Tillich, 'Ultimate Concern – Tillich in Dialogue by D. Mackenzie Brown', religion-online.org. 11 May 2005. <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=538&C=599>.
18. Paul Tillich, 'The Nature of Religious Language', *The Essential Tillich*, p. 53 (see Chap. 1, n. 35).
19. Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, p. 62.
20. Jesse Kalin argues that one of the reoccurring plot points in Bergman's films is 'turning', by which he means that Bergman's characters are always turning either to or away from each other. They are attempting either to fill a void in their lives or creating one in someone else's life. See Jesse Kalin, *The Films of Ingmar Bergman* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 12.
21. Tillich, *Essential Tillich*, p. 1.
22. See Kierkegaards account of *what* and *how* in Søren Kierkegaard *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, p. 213 (see Chap. 1, n. 5).

23. Tillich, *Essential Tillich*, p. 7.
24. Frank Gado, *The Passion of Ingmar Bergman* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1986), p. 195.
25. Frank Gado, *The Passion of Ingmar Bergman*, p. 294.
26. Astrid Söderbergh Widding, 'What Should We Believe?: Religious Motifs in Ingmar Bergman's Films', in *Ingmar Bergman Revisited: Performance, Cinema, and the Arts*, ed. Maaret Koskinen (London: Wallflower Press, 2008), pp. 195–196.
27. Widding, 'What Should We Believe?', p. 201.
28. My position on this is similar to my position on Sartre's concept of the project. I think it's quite possible that there is no ultimate project/ultimate concern that encompasses and makes sense of all our choices. However, the choice of meaningful projects/concerns are of a different type than the more instrumental, day-to-day concerns that occupy the majority of our day. It's the fact that we choose the former that makes the latter seem purposeful, though there may be a number of such meaningful projects/ concerns.
29. Widding, 'What Should We Believe?', p. 207.

6 Rethinking Raskolnikov: Exploring Contemporary Ethical Challenges in the Films of Woody Allen

1. I made this comparison originally elsewhere. See William C. Pamerleau, 'Rethinking Raskolnikov: Exploring Contemporary Ethical Horizons in Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors*', *Film and Philosophy* (Special Edition: 2000): 102–114.
2. Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. F. M. Cornford (Oxford University Press: New York, 1975), p. 26.
3. Note that this is also the position put forward by Judah's Aunt May in the Seder scene.
4. From the *Republic*, this was a ring that turned the wearer invisible and allowed him or her to get away with any crime. Plato, *The Republic*, p. 22.
5. John G. Pappas, 'It's All Darkness: Plato, The Ring of Gyges, and *Crimes and Misdemeanors*', in *Woody Allen and Philosophy* (Chicago: Open Court, 2004), pp. 203–217.
6. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Vintage Books, 1950), p. 373.
7. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), p. 53.
8. 'The history of Napoleon's reception is almost the history of the higher happiness attained by this whole century in its most valuable human beings and moments.' Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 111.
9. Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, p. 376.
10. Ibid., p. 238.
11. Ernest J. Simmons, Introduction to *Crime and Punishment*, p. 4.
12. Although Nietzsche might agree, observing that persons who *are* so capable are rare.

13. Sander Lee characterizes the existential dilemmas of the film in this fashion, and it seems right to me. This is the key challenge the existentialists present to moral thinking. Choices about morality 'must be made without any objective knowledge of right and wrong'. Sander Lee, *Woody Allen's Angst* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 1997), p. 268.
14. Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, p. 377.
15. Ibid., pp. 464–465.
16. All dialogue quoted from this film is transcribed by me from the DVD. *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, directed by Woody Allen (1989; MGM Home Entertainment, 2005).
17. Peter Bailey, *The Reluctant Film Art of Woody Allen* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), p. 143.
18. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov,* trans. Andrew H. MacAndrew (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), p. 296.
19. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions,* trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Wisdom Library, 1957), p. 40.
20. Ibid., p. 41.
21. Ibid., p. 45.
22. Lee, *Woody Allen's Angst*, pp. 287–288.
23. James Lawler, 'Does Morality Have to Be Blind? A Kantian Analysis of *Crimes and Misdemeanors*', from *Woody Allen and Philosophy*, p. 47.
24. In interview, Allen explains his view of Judah at the end of the film. 'Any quandary he has, he's going to rationalize it away to do what he wants. And he does it, and gets away with it. He has a couple of tense moments after, a couple of bad moments, but that's all. He leaves the party with his beautiful wife. His daughter is going to get married soon. Everything is fine for him. So, if he doesn't choose to punish himself, nobody else will. Evil is only punished if you get caught. He's a terrible person, but he himself is fine.' *Woody Allen on Woody Allen: In Conversation with Stig Björkman* (New York: Grove Press, 1993), p. 226.
25. Mary Nichols, *Reconstructing Woody* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), p. 151. See also Richard Combs, 'Woody's Wars: *Crimes and Misdemeanors*', in *Sight and Sound* (Summer, 1990): 207.
26. John Pappas, 'It's All Darkness: Plato, The Ring of Gyges, and *Crimes and Misdemeanors*', in *Woody Allen and Philosophy*, p. 217.
27. All dialogue quoted from this film is transcribed by me from the DVD. *Match Point*, directed by Woody Allen (2005; Dreamworks Video, 2006).
28. Some commentators see *Crimes and Misdemeanors* as concluding on a far more pessimistic note than I do. Peter Bailey, for example, argues that Allen 'presents the highly conventionalized ending to mock its own pretensions to resolution and determinacy, the silently reprised images on the screen often contending with the existentialistically optimistic conclusion of Levy's philosophizing which are their aural backdrop'. Bailey, *The Reluctant Film Art of Woody Allen*, pp. 136–137. I don't agree that self-mockery is the intent of Levy's voiceover, and I would argue that there is enough evidence in this movie to suggest that meaning *can* be won in an indifferent universe (at least occasionally) to support my assertions even if Bailey is right about Levy.

7 Authenticity in the Films of Federico Fellini

1. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 312 (see Chap. 1, n. 20).
2. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 319.
3. For example, see Linda Bell, *Sartre's Ethics of Authenticity* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1989). She reconstructs an entire 'ethics of authenticity' from Sartre's philosophy by unpacking the various ways in which Sartre advocates freedom in the period influenced by *Being and Nothingness*.
4. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, trans. George J. Becker (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), p. 60.
5. Ibid, p. 90.
6. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 87 (see Chap. 1, n. 23).
7. For a discussion of this essay and its philosophical difficulties, see Thomas R. Flynn, *Sartre and Marxist Existentialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 33–42.
8. Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Humanism of Existentialism', p. 37 (see Chap. 1, n. 2).
9. Ibid., p. 47.
10. Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, trans. David Pellaeur (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 475.
11. Sartre, *Notebooks*, p. 4.
12. For example, Pier Paolo Pasolini argues that Fellini's provincial and Catholic upbringing makes him unsuited to recognize the material and historical reality of his culture. See Pier Paolo Pasolini, 'The Catholic Irrationalism of Fellini', *Perspectives on Federico Fellini*, ed. Peter Bondanella and Cristina Degli-Esposti (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1993), pp. 101–109.
13. Stuart Rosenthal, *The Cinema of Federico Fellini* (South Brunswick and New York: A. S. Barnes and Company, 1976), p. 35.
14. Fellini, *Fellini on Fellini* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996), p. 152.
15. Ibid., p. 150.
16. Ibid., p. 100. I also found helpful Rosenthal's reflections on Fellini as artist who is not an intellectual. See Rosenthal, *Cinema of Federico Fellini*, pp. 29–30.
17. Rosenthal, *Cinema of Federico Fellini*, p. 75.
18. Ibid., p. 11.
19. John C. Stubbs, *Federico Fellini as Auteur: Seven Aspects of his Films* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006), p. 17.
20. All dialogue quoted from this film are subtitles from the DVD. *La dolce vita*, directed by Federico Fellini (1960; International Media Films, 2004).
21. Rosenthal, *The Cinema of Federico Fellini*, p. 101.
22. Sartre's account of relationships, at least in *Being and Nothingness*, amounts to the attempt to either objectify others or be objectified by others. Marcello's relationship with Steiner probably needs a more robust account than what Sartre is capable of.
23. All dialogue quoted from this film are subtitles from the DVD. *8½*, directed by Federico Fellini (1963; The Criterion Collection, 2001).
24. Peter Bondanella, *The Films of Federico Fellini* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 105.
25. Ibid., pp. 113–114.

8 The Nietzschean Free Spirit in *Dead Poets Society* and *Harold and Maude*

1. There are a host of works that could be cited as examples, but MacIntyre's *After Virtue* is a good representative of them. MacIntyre argues that the existentialists have taken to its ultimate conclusion the Enlightenment's overemphasis on the individual, and he recommends instead a return to an Aristotelian understanding of the community as a source of values and ethical norms. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp. 204–225. Of course, many critics of existentialism argue for its relevance despite its flaws. Thomas Flynn does this for Sartre, for example. See Thomas Flynn, *Sartre and Marxist Existentialism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984).
2. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 30 (see Chap. 1, n. 4).
3. See Richard Schacht's introduction in *Human All Too Human*: Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. vii–xxv.
4. Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human*, p. 57.
5. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pp. 146–147 (see Chap. 1, n. 18).
6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), p. 297.
7. Ibid., p. 307.
8. Nietsche, *Gay Science*, p. 169.
9. This distinction between Truth with a small T and a capital T I borrow from Richard Rorty. See Richard Rorty, *The Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. xiii–xxi.
10. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 137.
11. Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human*, p. 108.
12. Ibid., p. 7.
13. Ibid., p. 290.
14. All dialogue quoted from this film is transcribed by me from the DVD. *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir (1989; Touchstone Home Video, 1998).
15. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 139.
16. Nietzsche's explanation of the predominance of Christianity is based largely on what he sees as a cultural war between the herd-like masses and aristocratic nobility. See the various sections throughout *A Genealogy of Morals* that describe the conflict between master and slave morality, and between the nobility and the herd.
17. All dialogue quoted from this film is transcribed by me from the DVD. *Harold and Maude*, directed by Hal Ashby (1971; Paramount Pictures, 2000).
18. The power of creative interpretation and observation is brilliantly captured in Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2007), p. 14.

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